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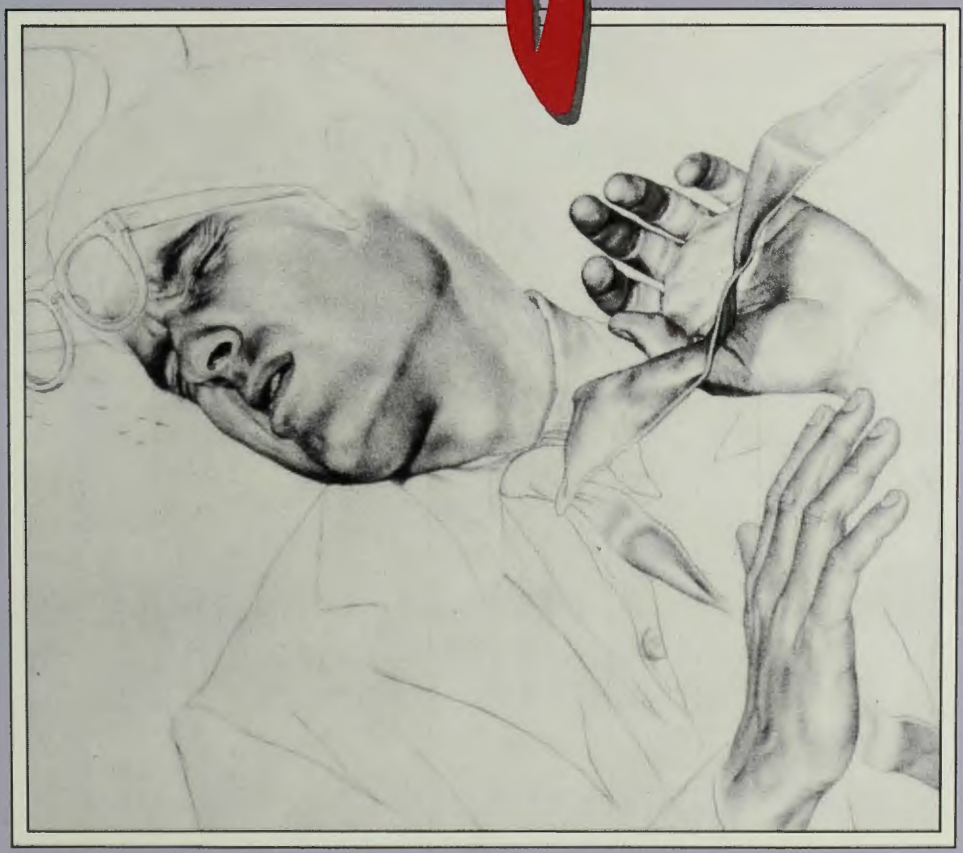

FEATURING: THE PROSE AND POETRY OF AIME CESAIRE ▲ THE LIONS BY CHARLES STEIN ▲ NINE POEMS BY PETER REDGROVE

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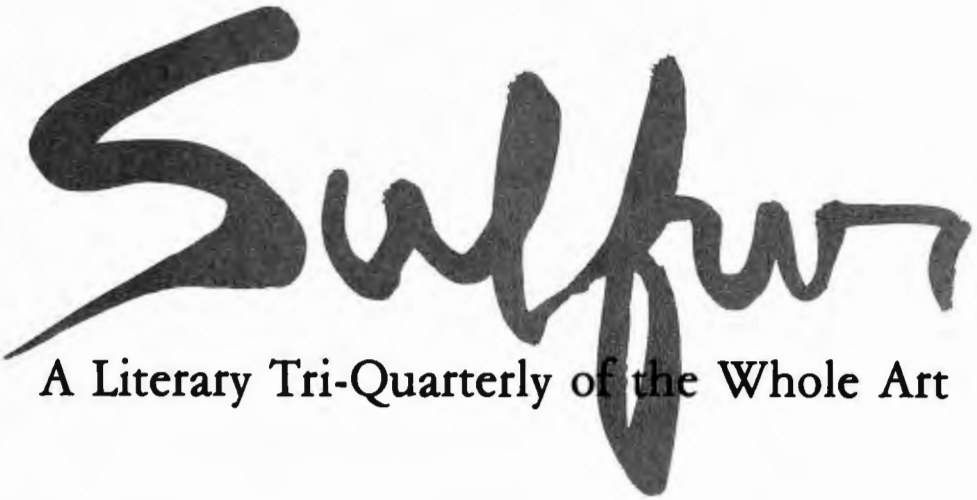

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Eliot Weinberger

Kenneth Rexroth 1905-1982

POETRY MAGAZINE, REVIEWING HIS FIRST BOOK, compared the poems to the license-plates made by convicts, and suggested the poet consider another profession. Alfred Kazin called him an "old-fashioned American sorehead;" and *The New Yorker*, with its usual bemused condescension, nicknamed him "Daddy-o." In a short obituary, *The New York Times* could remember him only as "Father Figure to Beat Poets."

Born in another country, Kenneth Rexroth would have served as the intellectual conscience of the nation: a Paz, Neruda, MacDiarmid, Hikmet. But here, as he wrote, "There is no place for a poet in American society. No place at all for any kind of poet at all." So in his life, and at his death, he was largely seen as a crank, a colorful American eccentric who once spiced occasional magazine copy and three well-known romans-à-clef.

I take Rexroth to be a major American writer: the author of the most readable long poems in English in this century and the master works of the "generation of revolutionary hopelessness;" of lyrics of an erotic intensity, worthy of the Palatine Anthology or Vidyakara's

Treasury, that has not been heard in English for 300 years; of the most entertaining autobiography in American letters ("it would not, I think," wrote a contemporary reviewer, "make suitable reading for the envious"); of essays unmatched by any poet for their boundless erudition, straight talk and general feistiness; of translations that were never ego-trips and will endure.

And I take Rexroth to be a major *American* writer, for he alone among poets in this century embraces what there is to love in the country: ghetto street-smartness, the wilderness, populist anti-capitalism, jazz and rock & roll, the Utopian communities, the small bands at the advance guard of the various arts, and all the unmelted lumps in the melting pot. He was the first poet whose enthusiasm for tribal culture was not picked up from Frobenius, Frazer or the Musée de l'Homme, but rather by living with American Indians; an early fighter for civil rights, and not only *not* anti-Semitic, but an expert on Hassidism and the Kabbalah. Above all, he was America's great Christian poet—a Christianity, that is, which has rarely appeared on this continent: the communion of a universal brotherhood.

His enemies were the institutions (the U.S. and Soviet states, the corporations, the universities, the church) and their products: sexual repression, academic art, racism and sexism, the charmlessness of the bourgeoisie, the myth of progress, the razing of the natural world. His 1960 essay, "The Students Take Over," was dismissed by a critic as "mad" for "announcing a nationwide revolution among students on behalf of national and international integrity." By 1969 *The Nation* would write, "What is most viable in the so-called New Left is in large part the creation of Rexroth and Paul Goodman whether the movement knows it or not." As always in Rexroth's life, the initial reaction stuck, and the fact that he was proved right forgotten: "When a prophet refuses to go crazy, he becomes quite a problem, crucifixion being as complicated as it is in humanitarian America."

Although Gary Snyder can be read almost as a translation of Rexroth, and though it is difficult to imagine "Howl" without the ex-

ample of "Thou Shalt Not Kill," Rexroth's effect on poetry in his lifetime was mainly as a tireless promoter: responsible for bringing Levertov, Snyder, Rothenberg, Ferlinghetti, Antin and others to New Directions; organizer of discussion groups and reading series and radio programs; advocate journalist. Now, at his death—the primary condition for immortality in this country—the legacy he leaves in the poems is so simple it may come as a revelation towards a possible revolution:

One can write great poetry that anyone who reads can read.

Michel Leiris

Who Is Aimé Césaire?

Translated from the French by A. James Arnold

My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice, the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair.
(Cahier d'un retour au pays natal.)

ANDRÉ BRETON HAS the distinction of having been the first to point out, in his epoch-making article *A Great Black Poet*, the importance of Aimé Césaire's appearance on the scene of French-language poetry and of poetry in general.

In April 1941 Breton, who was in Fort-de-France on his way to the United States and had just been subjected to police harrassment by representatives of the pseudo-government in Vichy, discovered an issue of the magazine *Tropiques* and then met Césaire, the principal force behind that publication whose contents proved that in spite of the horrible blows recently dealt to freedom there were still voices independent, timely and resounding enough that their very existence was a pledge against despair for the fate of mankind. In Césaire, Breton recognized a magnificent spokesman for surrealism's enduring and essential claim: that instead of being put down and divided against himself, as he is in all parts of the globe where rationalistic and mechanistic Western civilization is dominant, man should finally come into possession of his total humanity, which is out of the question as long as internal and external chains are imposed on him in the

name of fallacious utilitarian pretexts. But does the convergence of the views of the *Tropiques* team with those of the group Breton had founded more than fifteen years earlier mean that the exceptional calibre of the "great Black poet" must be measured by the yardstick of surrealism alone?

Of course, Césaire owes much to this movement and to some writers of the second half of the last century from whom the surrealists claimed descent, notably Rimbaud (in whom Cesaire discovered the "rebel" that he himself had been from childhood) and Lautréamont (from whom he borrowed some turns of phrase, as several of his early writings testify). This took place in the hubbub of adolescent reading that also allowed him, as a boy casting about for the elements of a new language, to taste Claudel's "rustic" quality, over and above his catholicity, and Freud and Marx as well, whose joint influence acted upon his thought as it had acted upon the surrealists'. Moreover, it was in Paris, and thanks to a young Senegalese, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who like himself was a student there, that he discovered the beauty of Negro--African civilizations in the ethnographic works of Leo Frobenius and Maurice Delafosse, a decisive event.

As for his principal ideas, Césaire found in surrealism a way of looking at the world that had to appeal to him. Wasn't surrealism in open revolt against the entire framework of western rationalism, which the European intellectuals assembled around Breton rejected as an intolerable tyranny, less tolerable still for a Black Antillean since that framework is, historically, the one the Whites *superimposed*, so to speak, on the slaves they imported from Africa and on their descendants?

Poetically, surrealism has appeared to a few Martinicans of Césaire's generation as a way out of the academic formalism their elders had subscribed to, guided as they were by a desire to demonstrate their cultural refinement by pure and simple imitation of the models imported from Europe. It was naive to try to use the Creole idiom as a literary vehicle of opposition, since that meant not only conforming

to a superficial exoticism and locking oneself inside the narrow bounds of an outdated folklore, it also meant giving in to an idiom that had been forged in the humiliating conditions of slavery and has remained marked by them. Like Parnassianism, which had had a good many disciples abroad, surrealism was certainly a product of Europe, so that it was a simple matter to claim that the attitude of those Martinicans who were passionately interested in surrealism differed from the attitude of their predecessors only in the feeble extent to which Europe this time brought them the teaching of a different school. But contrary to Parnassianism, this European phenomenon was truly an instrument of warfare aimed against the ideas imported from Europe and, on top of that, by founding its method on automatic writing as a means of forgetting all that had been learned by descending into the deepest recesses of the self, this instrument furnished Césaire and his friends with a method which, first of all, would provide a *tabula rasa* and without creating any ruts in advance, it would permit them to get rid of their Antillean alienation (whereas they were Africans by reason of part of their ancestry at least, their culture was essentially French) and so to rediscover the authenticity that had been denied them.

This is approximately the amount of the Martinican Césaire's debt to modern European literature and thought that, not so long ago, evolved in a part of the world which today has lost many of its privileges. But hasn't this Martinican given back to world culture a truly irreplaceable contribution?

European surrealism, which provided a basis other than indiscriminate negation for the total subversion of arts and letters undertaken by Dada, expressed the revolt of a certain number of intellectuals who could no longer take satisfaction in any of the goals that bourgeois society offered its members, and who were indignant at the general state of affairs around them: the accountant mentality that regarded any exaltation of feeling or of the senses as a threat to law and order, a pervasive industrialization, the exploitation of practically everybody

by a pretentious, silly minority who held all the important positions, colonial wars in which violence bordering on extreme barbarity was perpetrated against peoples whose only crime was to refuse a Western take-over. Not only was the officially recognized philosophy of rationalism undermined in theory by progress in the physical and social sciences, it also appeared in practice to function as the tool and the cover for the most inhumane undertakings of a civilization centered on technology and profit. From all this derived the high value attached to the irrational (automatic writing and dreams), to the hyperrational (Alfred Jarry's pataphysics), even to the paralogical (occultism), as snubs to the Cartesian tradition and as a means for partially recuperating that which mankind is necessarily cut off from in a technological, profit-oriented society—that essential part which will be won or lost on a plane other than that of the intellect.

The surrealists were certainly sincere in embracing the proletarian cause, the only factor of positive upheaval they could count on. But their revolt—at the outset it was a mental revolt, a protest and a disavowal deriving from value judgments that lay claim to a higher morality—was not motivated by a sense of belonging objectively to a disadvantaged class. On the other hand, Césaire's revolt, though it was linked to similar high aims, sprang from his daily experience of injustice against the group with which he was aligned, a group that the Martinican ruling class, supported by metropolitan France, allows almost in its entirety to stagnate in poverty and, to top it off, despises for its physical features as well. That is why it should not be surprising that Césaire's surrealism takes on an especially harsh and dense quality: something like a volcanic explosion which had no need to place itself "in the service of the Revolution" since it was already of the same nature, having been born of the direct pressure of those harsh realities that open the way to revolutionary movements.

However disconcerting Césaire's poetry may sometimes be with its unbridled lyricism, its wild exuberance and its willfully sibylline form, it is never far from concrete expression and has, moreover,

gradually become more essential and clear, and has got rid of some baroque excrescences. Real scenes, sensations and feelings are far more important than imaginary constructions, however much an extraordinary freedom of expression and a frequently apocalyptical tenor might induce one to believe that the poet puts little stock in the real world he lives in or in the precise way he lives in that world.

Yearnings of the heart, the evocation of his native land, or more generally, the exaltation of the tropics (as the antithesis of Western measure) through an explicit appeal to material details or a kind of mimetic savagery negating the very order of his utterance, references to the fate of Blacks, to Africa, which virtually haunts him, to the urgency of instituting a free and just society, to the overgrown and rocky terrain to be crossed in order to reach that society, these constitute the warp and woof—sometimes manifest, sometimes latent—of poems whose rhythm is almost always torrential and choppy, rich in unusual images and in odd turns wherein the frequent strangeness of the words (names of vegetable and animal species that Césaire intends to designate precisely so as to better react against Antillean "vagueness" and to make the thing itself stand out better, rare terms or neologisms that his solid training in French and Latin allows him to form easily) testifies neither to some preciosity nor to a desire to surprise the reader, but simply to his will to extend the vocabulary of poetry and to take advantage of all the resources of the word as a prodigious human instrument.

Among the themes on which Césaire's poetry is constructed (not as a discourse on elevated subjects, but as the natural expression of what is most meaningful to him), the central theme is certainly that of "negritude." He and his friend Senghor put forward this idea when along with another future anticolonialist poet, the Guianese Léon Damas, they published a paper called *The Black Student* [*L'Etudiant noir*], which aimed at enlightening their comrades from Africa and the New World concerning the common bond of their ancestry and their common condition as well: their belonging to a category of

people whom the industrialized society of the West, and the imperialism deriving from it, not only exploits but who, in the eyes of Whites, are condemned as inferiors by the color of their skin. One must accept one's negritude positively, no longer shameful at being Black, and proudly lay claim to one's African roots; this is the substance of the message Césaire has struggled to communicate from his student days on and which has broadened and deepened with its proponent's increasing maturity.

It is necessary to insist a bit, since the idea has lent itself to numerous misunderstandings: "negritude" in Césaire's conception of it is not a synonym for "Blackness first" and it in no way corresponds to what some have called a racism in reverse. The Black race is no more the chosen people than any other and, if it has one sovereign privilege, it is that of having for centuries, because of the slave trade and the enslavement of nearly all of Africa, undergone material and moral attacks that make of Blacks the "humiliated and offended" *par excellence*. It goes without saying that one could not truly and wholly live one's negritude without affirming the value of Black African cultures. If what Blacks have been able to create with a rudimentary technology were unworthy of our attention, the injustice would be less flagrant and the wisest policy would be to endure ill fortune with a stout heart. Therefore it is imperative for all to know that, in many respects, these cultures can teach us precious lessons. For all that, can one consider oneself thoroughly Black without giving them the benefit of one's affection? This does not mean, however, that African cultures are decreed to be superior: what must be obtained for them is finally the right to equality or, most precisely, the right to be what they are and to remain *different*.

For Césaire to be conscious of his negritude and to be conscious of it as a Martinican requires that he pursue from the start two objectives: politically, to free his country of forms of economic exploitation that condemn the masses to pauperism; culturally, to bring the specifically Antillean element into proper relief, which implies that with-

out underestimating the role of Western civilization one must turn toward the African heritage that is so often forgotten or denied by colored Antilleans who want only to be first-class Frenchmen. But thanks to an intelligence that finds a footing in his knowledge of Marxism, Césaire does not remain on that level alone: no salvation is possible for a people (or for an individual) in isolation and no one can claim to be free in a world where freedom is held up to ridicule by the oppression of others. Césaire, humiliated and offended, will therefore take up the cause of all the humiliated and offended, whatever race they may belong to, and his grand design will be to work toward a completely free world order in which henceforth no one should be obliged to endure the ordeals endured by the Black race. He was to commit himself in this direction not only as a writer but more actively as well, which is why he was to become Mayor and Deputy from Fort de-France, first as a Communist leader and later as the leader of the Martinican Progressive Party, working for his constituents, of course, but in such a way as to work for all Blacks and for all humanity as well.

Throughout his various stages, which represent a deepening rather than an evolution of his thought, Césaire has on all occasions shown himself to be a humanist and a universalist in the grand tradition. The thirst for liberation that drives him and which knows neither ethnic nor geographic boundaries, has always expressed itself in two areas, the one social and the other psychological. To finally bring about a world order such that no group or individual shall be oppressed or despoiled by it and in which none of mankind's inner resources shall be stifled, as they are in a civilization posited on technological excess, such are the ultimate goals toward which Césaire directs his labors, not as a Utopian, but as a man who knows that nothing worthwhile can be realized without a constant effort to surpass the present, without a vast enough vision to take in everything.

This elevation of vision and this passion for humanity are manifest, expressly or on reading between the lines, in all of Césaire's writings:

the poetic and dramatic works, those of the political man who is capable of functioning as an historian, and the speeches of the orator (which unfortunately have nearly all disappeared). Is this not the quality that gives them all an equal density and resonance, whatever the genre in which Césaire expresses himself: opening up to the song or the cry of pure poetry, formulating trenchant criticism, or objectively reporting facts.* Throughout this diversity of accents one discovers in the Césaire of today as in the young poet, what Breton had recognized at once: that invariably *major* tonal quality which is close to what Baudelaire meant in his reference to Chateaubriand, Alphonse Rabbe and Edgar Allan Poe in *Fusées:* "the eternal note, the eternal and cosmopolitan style."

A great Black poet according to Breton and according to those Africans who consider him one of their own, it happens that Césaire is a Martinican poet, born on an island that is not only a racial and cultural melting pot, but that possesses a still more significant characteristic: this tiny and presently overpopulated territory constitutes the grudging support for a civilization of transplants. In Martinique today no one can claim to be indigenous, since the Indians who were the first inhabitants were wiped out by immigrants from Europe a little over three centuries ago and since the white settlers made use of Africa to furnish its manpower; so that the present population essentially includes a small number of White descendants of those settlers or of more recent ones, Black descendants of former slaves and a large number of colored people sprung from the mixing of the two races.

If the poet is essentially someone who has to construct another world because he finds in this world no place to really put down roots, one is tempted to think that Césaire, more uprooted than anybody else because he is conscious of being the product of a disparate and narrow society that was formed not only in violence and iniquity but

---

* A clause concerning the style of Césaire's play *The Tragedy of King Christophe* has been dropped by the translator. (AJA)

under the sign of a general transplantation as well, was in the most favorable situation to become more a poet than anybody else. Doubtless these conditions go some way toward explaining why the quest for authenticity, the reason behind all great poetry (to achieve one's own truth by creating one's own view of things), but in this case responding to the brutality of the real situation, was for Césaire all the more powerful as a motivation since the stakes were of immediate importance both for him and for a multitude of other uprooted people. Why, too, the freedom of expression he owed to surrealist practice led him to write so many poems whose jagged and torn aspect expresses, over and above their content, his profound state of division and disturbance at the same time that it reflects the practically unresolvable contradiction between the use of French (the mother tongue that he handles like a classical writer) and his urgent desire to become as African as possible. However, these are finally only conditions that others have reacted to differently, and if the analysis of this substratum can help one understand the sense of Césaire's vocation in terms of the precise range of his main themes and some of the characteristics of his poetry, it is vain to expect it to shed any light on the original cause of the presence in him of such verbal power. To try to explain the poetic genius of Césaire as a function of his Martinican origins would be as absurd as looking for the key to Lautréamont in the sociology of Montevideo or in the sociology of Charleville for the reasons behind Rimbaud's sudden appearance.

If there can be no further doubt that Césaire is not only a great Black poet but a great poet of decolonization, it is none the less necessary to forget his "negritude" and to listen to his voice as that of a great poet, period. For that, no better preparation than to place oneself in that perfectly unencumbered state that he talks about in his *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, concerning those men who have sprung from the land of Africa, for him the object of ardent nostalgia:

> but yield, captivated, to the essence of all things

ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things
indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world
truly the eldest sons of the world
porous to all the breathing of the world
fraternal locus for all the breathing of the world
drainless channel for all the water of the world
spark of the sacred fire of the world
flesh of the world's flesh pulsating with the very motion
of the world!

—1965

Translator's Note

Michel Leiris (b. 1901) is a practitioner of what James Clifford calls ethnographic surrealism. As a professional ethnographer he has written on the Dogon people in *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934) and in *La Langue secrète des Dogons...* (1948), on the Ethiopians of Gondar (1980), and on race relations in the French West Indies (1955). As an esthetician he has written on *African Art* (Golden Press, 1968) and also on *André Masson and His Universe* (1947), on "Picasso and the Human Comedy" (1954), on the Afro-Cuban painter Wifredo Lam (1971), and on Francis Bacon (1977). His autobiography *La Règle du jeu* (four volumes since 1948) is pioneering writing. He has experimented with the novel (*Aurora*, 1946) and has written on literature as tauromachy (1946). "Who is Aimé Césaire?" dates from 1965 and is printed here for the first time in English with the author's permission.

△

Aimé Césaire

Poetry and Knowledge

Translated from the French by A. James Arnold

POETIC KNOWLEDGE is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.

Mankind, once bewildered by sheer data, finally dominated them through reflection, observation, and experiment. Henceforth mankind knows how to make its way through the forest of phenomena. It knows how to utilize the world.

But it is not the lord of the world on that account.

A view of the world, yes; science affords a view of the world, but a summary and superficial view.

Physics classifies and explains, but the essence of things eludes it. The natural sciences classify, but the *quid proprium* of things eludes them.

As for mathematics, what eludes its abstract and logical activity is reality itself.

In short, scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies and kills.

But it is not sufficient to state that scientific knowledge is succinct. It is necessary to add that it is *poor and half-starved.*

To acquire it mankind has sacrificed everything: desires, fears,

feelings, psychological complexes.

To acquire the impersonality of scientific knowledge mankind *depersonalized* itself, *deindividualized* itself.

An impoverished knowledge, I submit, for at its inception—whatever other wealth it may have—there stands an impoverished humanity.

In Aldous Huxley's *Do What You Will* there is a very amusing page. "We all think we know what a lion is. A lion is a desert-colored animal with a mane and claws and an expression like Garibaldi's. But it is also, in Africa, all the neighboring antelopes and zebras, and therefore, indirectly, all the neighboring grass... If there were no antelopes and zebras there would be no lion. When the supply of game runs low, the king of beasts grows thin and mangy; it ceases altogether, and he dies."

It is just the same with knowledge. Scientific knowledge is a lion without antelopes and without zebras. It is gnawed from within. Gnawed by hunger, the hunger of feeling, the hunger of life.

Then dissatisfied mankind sought salvation elsewhere, in the fullness of here and now.

And mankind has gradually become aware that side by side with this half-starved scientific knowledge there is another kind of knowledge. A fulfilling knowledge.

The Ariadne's thread of this discovery: some very simple observations on the faculty that permitted the human whom one must call the primitive scientist to discover the most solid truths without benefit of induction or deduction, as if by flair.

And here we are taken back to the first days of humanity. It is an error to believe that knowledge, to be born, had to await the methodical exercise of thought or the scruples of experimentation. I even believe that mankind has never been closer to certain truths than in the first days of the species. At the time when mankind discovered with emotion the first sun, the first rain, the first breath, the first moon. At the time when mankind discovered in fear and rapture the

throbbing newness of the world.

Attraction and terror. Trembling and wonderment. Strangeness and intimacy. Only the sacred phenomenon of love can still give us an idea of what that solemn encounter can have been...

It is in this state of fear and love, in this climate of emotion and imagination that mankind made its first, most fundamental and most decisive discoveries.

It was both desirable and inevitable that humanity should accede to greater precision.

It was both desirable and inevitable that humanity should experience nostalgia for greater feeling.

It is that mild autumnal nostalgia that threw mankind back from the clear light of scientific day to the nocturnal forces of poetry.

Poets have always known. All the legends of antiquity attest to it. But in modern times it is only in the nineteenth century, as the Apollonian era draws to a close, that poets dared to claim that they knew.

1850.—The revenge of Dionysus upon Apollo.

1850.—The great leap into the poetic void.

An extraordinary phenomenon... Until then the French attitude had been one of caution, circumspection, and suspicion. France was dying of prose. Then suddenly there was the great nervous spasm at the prospect of adventure. The prosiest nation, in its most eminent representatives—by the most mountainous routes, the hardest, haughtiest, and most breathtaking, by the only routes I am willing to call sacred and royal—with all weapons and equipment went over to the enemy. I mean to the death's-head army of freedom and imagination.

Prosy France went over to poetry. And everything changed.

Poetry ceased to be a game, even a serious one. Poetry ceased to be an occupation, even an honorable one.

Poetry became an adventure. The most beautiful human adventure. At the end of the road: clairvoyance and knowledge.

And so Baudelaire...

It is significant that much of his poetry relates to the idea of a penetration of the universe.

> Happy the man who can with vigorous wings
> Mount to those luminous fields serene!
>
> The man whose thoughts, like larks,
> Fly liberated to the skies at morning,
> —Who hovers over life and effortlessly harks
> *To the language of flowers and voiceless things!*

And in "Obsession":

> But the shadows are themselves canvases
> Wherein live, welling up in my eye by thousands,
> Beings invisible to the familiar gaze...

And in "Gypsies on the Road":

> Cybele, who loves them, increases her green glades,
>
> Makes rock flow and desert bloom
> Before these travelers, for whom
> Lies open the familiar empire of future shades.

As for Rimbaud, literature is still registering the aftershocks of the incredible seismic tremor of his famous *lettre du voyant:*

> I say that one has to be clairvoyant, to make oneself
> clairvoyant.

Memorable words, words of distress and of victory...

Henceforth, the field is clear for humanity's most momentous dreams.

There is no longer any possibility of doubt about Mallarmé's enterprise. The clear-eyed boldness of what he wrote to Verlaine makes of Mallarmé rather more than the poet whose shadow is Paul Valéry: an engineer of the mind of special importance.

> Apart from the prose pieces and the poetry of my youth and the aftermath that echoed them... I have always dreamed of and attempted something else... A book, very simply, a book that would be premeditated and architectonic, and not a collection of chance inspirations, even wondrous ones. I shall go farther; I shall say The Book, persuaded that at bottom there is only one, that anyone, even a genius, who has written was working at unconsciously. The Orphic explanation of the Earth, which is the poet's only duty. And the literary game par excellence... There you have my vice revealed.

To pass from Mallarmé to Apollinaire is to go from the cold calculator, the strategist of poetry, to the enthusiastic adventurer and ringleader.

Apollinaire, great because he knew how to stake out his territory, fundamentally, between popular ballad and the war poem, was one of the awesome workmen whose advent Rimbaud had predicted.

> You whose mouth is made in the image of God
> A mouth that is order itself
> Be indulgent when you compare us
> To those who were the perfection of order
> We who seek adventure everywhere
>
> We are not your enemies
> We want to give you vast and strange domains
> Where mystery in bloom is offered to whoever would
> pluck it
> New fires are found there colors yet unseen
> A thousand imponderable fantasms
> That await the conferral of reality
> We want to explore goodness an enormous country
> where all is silence
> Then there is time that you can banish or call back
> Pity for us who fight always on the frontiers

Of the limitless and of the future
Pity our errors pity our sins

I come now, having skipped a few stops, I confess, to André Breton... Surrealism's glory will be in having aligned against it the whole block of admitted and unprofessed enemies of poetry. In having decanted several centuries of poetic experience. In having purged the past, oriented the present, prepared the future.

It was André Breton who wrote:

> After all, it is the poets over the centuries who have made it possible to receive, and who have enabled us to expect, the impulses that may once again place humankind at the heart of the universe, abstracting us for a second from our dissolving adventure, reminding us of an indefinitely perfectible place of resolution and echo for every pain and joy exterior to ourselves.

And still more significantly:

> Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain mental point from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived contradictorily. And one would search in vain for a motive in surrealist activity other than the determination of that point.

Never in the course of centuries has higher ambition been expressed with greater tranquility.

This highest ambition is the ambition of poetry itself.

We have only to examine the conditions necessary to satisfy it, and their precise mode.

The ground of poetic knowledge, an astonishing mobilization of all human and cosmic forces.

It is not merely with his whole soul, it is with his entire being that the poet approaches the poem. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience: all the women loved, all the desires experienced, all

the dreams dreamed, all the images received or grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experience. All the possibility. Around the poem about to be made, the precious vortex: the ego, the id, the world. And the most extraordinary contacts: all the pasts, all the futures (the anticyclone builds its plateaux, the amoeba loses its pseudopods, vanished vegetations meet). All the flux, all the rays. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has a right to live. Everything is summoned. Everything awaits. Everything, I say. The individual whole churned up by poetic inspiration. And, in a more disturbing way, the cosmic whole as well.

This is the right occasion to recall that the unconscious that all true poetry calls upon is the receptacle of original relationships that bind us to nature.

Within us, all the ages of mankind. Within us, all humankind. Within us, animal, vegetable, mineral. Mankind is not only mankind. It is *universe*.

Everything happens as though prior to the secondary scattering of life, there was a knotty primal unity whose gleam poets have homed in on.

Mankind, distracted by its activities, delighted by what is useful, has lost the sense of that fraternity. Here is the superiority of the animal. And of the tree still more than of the animal, because the tree is fixed, attachment and perseverance to essential nature...

And because the tree is stability, it is also surrender.

Surrender to the vital movement, to the creative élan. Joyous surrender.

And the flower is the sign of that recognition.

The superiority of the tree over mankind, of the tree that says "yes" over mankind who says "no." Superiority of the tree that is consent over mankind who is evasiveness; superiority of the tree, which is rootedness and deepening, over mankind who is agitation and malfeasance.

And that is why mankind does not blossom at all.

Mankind is no tree. Its arms imitate branches, but they are withered branches which, for having misunderstood their true function (to embrace life), have fallen down along the trunk, have dried up: mankind does not blossom at all.

But one man is the salvation of humanity, one man puts humanity back in the universal concert, one man unites the human flowering with universal flowering; that man is the poet.

But what has he done for that?

Very little, but that little he alone could do. Like the tree, like the animal, he has surrendered to primal life, he has said yes, he has consented to that immense life that transcends him. He has rooted himself in the earth, he has stretched out his arms, he has played with the sun, he has become a tree: he has blossomed, he has sung.

In other words poetry is full bloom.

The blossoming of mankind to the dimensions of the world; giddy dilation. And it can be said that all true poetry, without ever abandoning its humanity, at the moment of greatest mystery ceases to be strictly human so as to begin to be truly cosmic.

There we see resolved, and by the poetic state, two of the most anguishing antinomies that exist: the antinomy of one and other, the antinomy of Self and World.

"Finally, oh happiness, oh reason, I listened to the azure sky, which is blackness, and I lived, a golden spark in nature's light."

So, pregnant with the world, the poet speaks.

In the beginning was the word...

...Never did a man believe it more powerfully than the poet.

And it is on the word, a chip off the world, secret and chaste slice of the world, that he gambles all our possibilities. Our first and last chance.

More and more the word promises to be an algebraic equation that makes the world intelligible. Just as the new Cartesian algebra permitted the construction of theoretical physics, so too an original handling of the word can make possible at any moment a new (theo-

retical and heedless) science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of. Then the time will come again when the study of the word will condition the study of nature. But at this juncture we are still in the shadows....

Let's come back to the poet. Pregnant with the world, the poet speaks.

He speaks and his speech returns language to its purity.

By purity I mean not subject to habit or thought but only to the cosmic thrust. The poet's word, the primal word: rupestral design in the stuff of sound.

The poet's utterance: primal utterance, the universe played with and copied.

And because in every true poem, the poet plays the game of the world, the true poet hopes to surrender the word to its free associations, certain that in the final analysis that is to surrender it to the will of the universe.

Everything I have just said runs the risk of implying that the poet is defenseless. But that isn't at all correct. If I further specify that in poetic emotion nothing is ever closer to anything than to its opposite, it will be understood that no peacemaker, no plumber of the deep was ever more rebellious or pugnacious.

Take the old idea of the irritable poet and transfer it to poetry itself. In this sense it is appropriate to speak of poetic violence, of poetic aggressivity, of poetic instability. In this climate of flame and fury that is the climate of poetry money has no currency, courts pass no judgments, judges do not convict, juries do not acquit. Only the firing squads still know how to ply their trade. The farther one proceeds the more obvious the signs of the disaster become. Police functions are strangulated. Conventions wear out. The Grammont laws for the protection of mankind, the Locarno agreements for the protection of animals suddenly and marvelously give up their virtues. A wind of confusion.

. . . . . .

An agitation that shakes the most solid foundations. At the bloodied far end of mortal avenues an immense disloyal sun sneers. It is the sun of humor. And in the dust of the clouds crows write one name over and over:

ISIDORE DUCASSE COUNT OF LAUTRÉAMONT.

Lautréamont, the very first in fact, integrated poetry and humor. He was the first to discover the functional role of humor. The first to make us feel that what love has begun, humor has the power to continue.

Sweeping clean the fields of the mind is not the least important role of humor. To dissolve with its blowtorch the fleeting connections that threaten to build up in our gray matter and harden it. It is humor, first and foremost, that assures Lautréamont—in opposition to Pascal, La Rouchefoucauld and so many other moralists—that had Cleopatra's nose been shorter the face of the world would not have been changed; that death and the sun can look one another in the face; that mankind is a subject empty of errors... that nothing is less strange than the contradictoriness one discovers in mankind. It is humor first and foremost that assures me it is as true to say the thief makes the opportunity as: "opportunity makes the thief..."

Humor alone assures me that the most prodigious turnabouts are legitimate. Humor alone alerts me to the other side of things.

We are now arriving in the crackling fields of metaphor.

One cannot think of the richness of the image without the repercussion suggesting the poverty of judgment.

> Judgment is poor from all the reason in the world.
> The image is rich with all the absurdity in the world.
> Judgment is rich with all the "thought" in the world.
> The image is rich with all the life in the universe.
> Judgment is poor from all the rationality in existence.

The image is rich with all the irrational in life.
Judgment is poor from all immanence.
The image is rich with all transcendence.

Let me explain...

However much one may strain to reduce analytical judgment to synthetic judgment; or to say that judgment supposes the connecting of two different concepts; or to insist on the idea that there is no judgment without X; that all judgment is a surpassing toward the unknown; that all judgment is transcendence, it is nonetheless true that in all valid judgment the field of transcendence is limited.

The barriers are in place; the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, the logical principle of the excluded middle.

Precious barriers. But remarkable limitations as well.

It is by means of the image, the revolutionary image, the distant image, the image that overthrows all the laws of thought that mankind finally breaks down the barrier.

In the image A is no longer A.

You whose many raspberried laughs
Are a flock of tame lambs.

In the image A can be A':

The black focus plate, real strand suns, ah! wells of magic.

In the image every object of thought is not necessarily A or A'.
The image maintains the possibility of the happy medium.
Another by Rimbaud:

The carts of silver and copper
The prows of steel and silver
Strike the foam
Raise the bramble roots.

Without taking into consideration the encouraging complicity of the world as it is either *found* or *invented*, which permit us to say

motor for *sun*, *dynamo* for *mountain*, *carburator* for *Carib*, etc... and to celebrate lyrically the shiny connecting rod of the moons and the tired piston of the stars...

Because the image extends inordinately the field of transcendence and the right of transcendence, poetry is always on the road to truth. And because the image is forever surpassing that which is perceived because the dialectic of the image transcends antinomies, on the whole modern science is perhaps only the pedantic verification of some mad images spewed out by poets....

When the sun of image reaches its zenith, everything becomes possible again... Accursed complexes dissolve, it's the instant of emergence...

What emerges is the individual foundation. The intimate conflicts, the obsessions, the phobias, the fixations. All the codes of the personal message.

It isn't a matter, as in the earlier lyric, of immortalizing an hour of pain or joy. Here we are well beyond anecdote, at the very heart of mankind, in the babbling hollow of destiny. My past is there to designate and to hide its face from me. My future is there to hold out its hand to me. Rockets flare. It is my childhood in flames. It is my childhood talking and looking for me. And within the person I am now the person I will be stands on tiptoe.

And what emerges as well is the old ancestral foundation.

Hereditary images that only the poetic atmosphere can bring to light again for ultimate decoding. The buried knowledge of the ages. The legendary cities of knowledge.

In this sense all the mythologies that the poet tumbles about, all the symbols he collects and regilds are true. And poetry alone takes them seriously. Which goes to make poetry a serious business.

The German philosopher Jung discovers the idea of energy and its conservation in Heraclitus's metaphor of the eternally living fire, in medieval legends related to saintly auras, in theories of metempsychosis. And for his part, Pierre Mabille regrets that the biologist

should believe it "dishonorable to describe the evolution of blood corpuscles in terms of the story of the phoenix, or the functions of the spleen through the myth of Saturn engendering children only to devour them."

In other words, myth is repugnant to science whereas poetry is in accord with it. Which does not mean that science is superior to poetry. To tell the truth, myth is both inferior and superior to *law*. The inferiority of myth is in the degree of precision. The superiority of myth is in richness and sincerity. Only myth satisfies mankind completely; heart, reason, taste for detail and wholeness, taste for the false and the true, since myth is all that at once, a misty and emotional apprehension, rather than a means of poetic expression...

Thus, love and humor.

Thus, the word, image, and myth...

With the aid of these great powers of synthesis we can at last understand André Breton's words:

> Columbus had to sail with madmen to discover America.
>
> And look at how that madness has been embodied, and lasted...
>
> It's not fear of madness that will oblige us to furl the flag of imagination.

It's not fear of madness that will oblige us to furl the flag of imagination.

And the poet Lucretius divines the indestructibility of matter, the plurality of worlds, the existence of the infinitely small.

And the poet Seneca in *Medea* sends forth ships on the trail of new worlds:

> In centuries to come the Ocean will burst the bonds within which it contains us. A land of infinity shall open before us. The pilot shall discover new countries and Thule will no longer be the ultimate land.

"It's not fear of madness that will oblige us to furl the flag of imagi-

nation..." And the painter Rousseau *invented* the vegetation of the tropics. And the painter De Chirico unknowingly painted Apollinaire's future wound on his forehead. And in the year 1924 the poet André Breton associated the number 1939 with the word *war*.

"It's not fear of madness that will oblige us to furl the flag of imagination." And the poet Rimbaud wrote *Illuminations*.

And the result is known to you: strange cities, extraordinary countrysides, worlds twisted, crushed, torn apart, the cosmos given back to chaos, order given back to disorder, being given over to becoming, everywhere the absurd, everywhere the incoherent, the demential. And at the end of all that! What is there? Failure! No, the flashing vision of his own destiny. And the most authentic vision of the world if, as I stubbornly continue to believe, Rimbaud is the first man to have experienced as feeling, as anguish, the modern idea of energetic forces in matter that cunningly wait to ambush our quietude...

No: "It's not fear of madness that will oblige us to furl the flag of imagination..."

And now for a few proposals by way of summation and clarification:

FIRST PROPOSAL

Poetry is that process which through word, image, myth, love and humor establishes me at the living heart of myself and of the world.

SECOND PROPOSAL

The poetic process is a naturalizing process operating under the demential impulse of imagination.

THIRD PROPOSAL

Poetic knowledge splatters its object with all its mobilized richness.

FOURTH PROPOSAL

If affective energy can be endowed with causal power as Freud indicated, it is paradoxical to refuse it power and penetration. It is con-

ceivable that nothing can resist the unheard of mobilization of force that poetry necessitates, or the multiplied élan of those forces.

FIFTH PROPOSAL

Marvelous discoveries occur at the equally marvelous contact of inner and outer totality perceived imaginatively and conjointly by, or more precisely within, the poet.

SIXTH PROPOSAL

Scientific truth has as its sign coherence and efficacity. Poetic truth has as its sign beauty.

SEVENTH AND FINAL PROPOSAL

The poetically beautiful is not merely beauty of expression or muscular euphoria. A too Apollonian or gymnastic idea of beauty paradoxically runs the risk of skinning, stuffing and hardening it.

COROLLARY

The music of poetry cannot be external or formal. The only *acceptable* poetic music comes from a greater distance than sound. To seek to musicalize poetry is the crime against poetic music, which can only be the striking of the mental wave against the rock of the world.

The poet is that very ancient yet new being, at once very complex and very simple who at the limit of dream and reality, of day and night, between absence and presence, searches for and receives in the sudden triggering of inner cataclysms the password of connivance and power.

(1944-1945)

Translator's Note

"Poetry and Knowledge" is the nearest thing to an *ars poetica* that Aimé Césaire wrote during his period of association with Surrealism. He was visiting Haiti as a lecturer and teacher when he read this paper at a meeting of philosophers in Port-au-

Prince on September 28, 1944. "Poetry and Knowledge" retains traces of Césaire's emphatic oral style, especially the rhythmic repetition of entire phrases, even in the text published by his literary magazine *Tropiques* in January 1945, the version translated here.

The cultural and political climate was rather special and bears on the exalted tone Césaire took in setting up poetry and Surrealism in opposition to science and logic. The Surrealist paradigm could still be seen as having the potential to carry over from individual to collective experience, from esthetics to politics. The Gaullist Governor of the French West Indies who arranged Césaire's official visit to Haiti was the Surrealist Pierre Mabille. Liberation was definitely in the air—in Martinique, which had been governed in the early years of the war by an admiral loyal to Pétain; and in Haiti, which was currently suffering under one of its many dictators, Elie Lescot. If the philosophers didn't take to the streets after Césaire's call to disorder, something of the sort did occur little more than a year later when André Breton and Wifredo Lam came to town. In January 1946 Breton gave a public lecture in Port-au-Prince that triggered a general strike in the university and widespread rebellion in the principal towns. René Depestre, who was then the nineteen-year-old editor of the newspaper *La Ruche*, has recently chronicled these events in *Bonjour et Adieu à la négritude* (Paris: Laffont, 1980).

Negritude as a rallying cry or an ideological position is noticeably absent from "Poetry and Knowledge." In the context of Port-au-Prince in 1944 the word was superfluous. For Césaire, after all, Haiti was the country where "negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity...." "Poetry and Knowledge" is about that humanity; it draws a straight line from the paleolithic cave artist to the poet of *Miraculous Weapons*.

△

Aimé Césaire

Thirteen Poems

Translated from the French
by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith

Visitation

oh surge without number without dust harbinger of each vinous
word
surge and my chest salted by the coves of ancient days and the
young color
tender on the breasts of the sky and of women electric with
what diamonds

eruptive forces trace your orbs
telepathic communications resume across the recalcitrant matter
messages of love strayed to the four corners of the world return
to us rekindled
by the carrier pigeons of sidereal traffic

as for me I have nothing to fear I am from before Adam I do not
come under the same lion
nor under the same tree I am from a different hot and a different
cold

oh my childhood of firefly milk and reptile quivering
but already the vigil was straining toward the star and the postern
and we were racing

across an arched sea incredibly planted with shipwrecked sterns
toward a shore where I was welcomed by a rustic people
penetrators of forests with wrought-iron
boughs in their hands—the comradely sleep on the jetty—the blue dog of metamorphosis
the white bear of icebergs and Your truly wild disappearance
tropical as an apparition of a nocturnal wolf at high noon

△

Debris

And shit like none other the sea without a sap without a listening post without a splinter shield
without communication trenches peeled of moons broken on the iron knees of the night
if a cephalopodic ex-voto from the coal mines I raised against its breast my mugpiece
of a green Antille
corymb of days corymb of nights
toward the hermaphroditic Nothing full sail cultivating its prioress and cross-bearing soul
shit between waking and sleeping of a sensitive plant I standing in the fields of blood and sunset thumping their hernandia sonora songs
and your forked tongue which my purity reveres Revolt
in the debris
it is the gorgon and isis drooling sea of my eyes and the harnessed air
rain and gold from the bullets of orgasm your eyes
shit it is the sea without an allelomorph opening its fans and rustling its nuts it is the sea laying down its entire chromosian hand it is

the sea imprinting a river of herds and tongues way under the palm of lethal lands and the wind its pocket full of shipwrecks with its mouth a source as fresh as your thought which I lose and which I hunt down between waking and sleeping
it is the sea my darling caryophyllaceous and virgin frothing toward the hermaphroditic Nothing its excellent woman's and ranunculus leaves in which spermatazoids of perfect birds are achieved

like the sun my darling like the sun a frog spattered in its nest with dry mud

△

Tom-Tom II

for Wifredo

with baby steps like a rain of caterpillars
with baby steps like a gulp of milk
with baby steps like ball bearings
with baby steps like a seismic tremor
the yams in the soil advance with giant steps like a breach of stars
like a breach of night like a Holy
Mother of God breach
with giant steps like a breach of words in a stutterer's throat
orgasm of the holy pollutions
hallelujah

△

The Oubliettes of the Sea and the Deluge

Day oh day of New York and of soukala
I put my trust in you
in you who will no longer be the absurd game of the death's-head moth and rebellious eczema
and the day very simply the day
takes off its gloves
its gloves of blue wind of raw milk of concentrated salt
its gloves of repose of dogfish egg and of fire of black straw
dryness
dryness
you will have no power against my aquiferous glands
the chemical ballet of rare lands
the powder of eyes finely ground up under the club
the immobily stubborn gulls of bobbins and water
create the inalterable alloy of my hourless sleep
hourless except for the geyser-like inappeasement of the trees of silence
hourless except for the fraternal catastrophe with its hippocampal horses and Campeachy wood
hourless except for my sisal and spider web eyes
my eyes of keystone and day wreckage
where the fever mounted on 300,000 fireflies can be caught
hourless except for the knives of the sun's jet hurled at full speed around the withers of the climates
hourless except for the birds that peck at the sky bays to appease their thirst-for-sleeping-in-the-deluge
hourless except for the inconsolable blood bird which from waiting lights up in the agriculture of your eyes undoers of fair weather
hourless except for the prodigious voice of forests which suddenly fill their sails in the drydocks of the swamp and coke

hourless except for the low water mark of lunations in the brain
bookkeeper for people fed on insults and millenniums
hourless except oh! hourless except for your phlegm incorruptible
bull
which never snows a more healthy or deadly call
than when—wheat-spike and novena of the disaster (the real one)—
the woman
who on her drinkable lips rocks the palanquin of the sea's
oubliettes
is awakened

from *The Miraculous Weapons* (1946)

△

Tangible Disaster

All insects accounted for (the metal of the grass has seized their
throats
ashy menses
slow leap of an oven handing out its surprise of loaves whose crew
entrapped dries out all litigation
disaster
lumps
at the eye's limit its mug gagged by clouds
a quartered volcano the Bedouin of this desert
a front for a sweet ole Carib rolling his caravan over bones
and years heard by engulfed
feet or an eruption what quadroon of massacred niggers or redskins
at night's end resheaths the dagger of your neverborn swagger
restituting your feet borne along by the waters
to the screamless apron of a presumptuous 'strom

Redemption

The loud noise gravitates rotten with cargo
wormy and bright wreckage of a soldanel
the loud noise gravitates a meninx of diamonds
your face glides naked into my milky frenzy

Amoebic swelter
miltic swelter true gossamers of the true immaculate virgin in the auroras of the sea when the maslin made skin and plunder of the damned

Sweltering piles of chipped plates of ruins of mangy dogs of deep-sea divers who glide away at dusk

Swelter crude radiance
in the barely moving nakedness of my hand
virgin umbilicus of the earth

△

Your Hair

Wouldn't you have taken it bombarded by lateritic blood
for a beautiful stript tree
the invincible and spacious cockcrowing already in invincible departure toward
—one imagines—a witches' sabbath of splendor and cities

Undulating innocent
all the juices rising in the lust of the earth
all the poisons distilled by the nocturnal alembics in

the involucres of the malvaceae
all the thundering of the saponaria
are like these discordant words written by the flames of pyres
over the sublime oriflammes of your revolt

Your hair
ingenuous flames licking a rare heart
the forest will remember the water and the alburnum
as I too remember the compassionate snouts
of big rivers that stumble around like blind men
the forest remembers that the last word can only be
the flaming cry of the bird of ruins in the bowl of the storm

Innocent who goes there
forget to remember
that the baobab is our tree
that it barely waves arms so dwarfed
that you would take it for an imbecilic giant
and you
inhabited by my insolence my tombs my twisters
mane bundle of lianas violent hope of the shipwrecked
sleep softly by the meticulous trunk of my embrace my woman
my citadel

△

Noon Knives

When the Niggers make Revolution they begin by uprooting giant trees from the Champ de Mars which they hurl like bayings into the face of the sky and which in the hottest of the air aim at pure streams of cool birds at which they fire blanks. Fire blanks? Yes indeed be-

cause blankness (or whiteness) is precisely the controversial color of the blackness which they carry in their hearts and which never ceases to conspire in the little too well made hexagons of their pores. The white shots then plant ladies-of-the-night in the sky which are not unrelated to the coifs of Saint Joseph de Cluny nuns laundered under the bread and wine of noon amidst the solar jubilation of tropical soap.

Noon? Yes, Noon dispersing in the sky the too complacent cotton wool which muffles my words, which traps my screams. Noon? Yes Noon almond of the night and tongue between my pepper fangs. Noon? Yes Noon which carries on its shoulders of a bum and a glazier all the sensitivity toward hatred and ruins that counts. Noon? sure Noon which after pausing on my lips for the time it takes to curse and at the cathedral limits of idleness sets on every line of every hand the trains that repentence kept in reserve in the strongboxes of severe time. Noon? Yes sumptuous Noon which makes me absent from this world.

Sweet Lord!

savagely I spit. Into the face of the starvers, into the face of the revilers, into the face of the paraschites and of the eviscerators.

Savage Lord! sweetly I whistle; I whistle sweetly

Sweet like the dwarf elder

sweet like the glass of catastrophe

sweet like the cloak of bird feathers which vengeance dons after the crime

sweet like the greeting of tiny waves caught in their petticoats in the chambers of the manchineel

sweet like a river of mandibles and the eyelid of a parrot

sweet like a rain of ash empearled with tiny fires.

Oh! I stick to my pact

upright in my wounds where against the shafts of shipwreck my blood beats the cadavers of croaked dogs out of which hummingbirds are rocketing, this is the day

a day for our fraternal feet
a day for our hands without rancor
a day for our breath without diffidence
a day for our faces free of shame

and the Niggers go searching in the dust—gems singing in their ears at the top of their voices—for the splinters from which mica is made as well as moons and the fissile slate out of which sorcerers make the intimate ferocity of the stars.

from *Solar Throat Slashed* (1948)

△

Lost Body

I who Krakatoa
I who everything better than a monsoon
I who open chest
I who Laelaps
I who bleat better than a cloaca
I who outside the musical scale
I who Zambezi or frantic or rhombos or cannibal
I would like to be more and more humble and more lowly
always more serious without vertigo or vestige
to the point of losing myself falling
into the live semolina of a well-opened earth
Outside in lieu of atmosphere there'd be a beautiful haze
no dirt in it
each drop of water forming a sun there
whose name the same for all things
would be DELICIOUS TOTAL ENCOUNTER

so that one would no longer know what goes by
—a star or a hope
or a petal from the flamboyant tree
or an underwater retreat
raced across by the flaming torches of aurelian jellyfishes
Then I imagine life would flood my whole being
better still I would feel it touching me or biting me
lying down I would see the finally free odors come to me
like merciful hands
finding their way
to sway their long hair in me
longer than this past that I cannot reach.
Things stand back make room among you
room for my repose carrying in waves
my frightening crest of anchor-like roots
looking for a place to take hold
Things I probe I probe
me the street-porter I am root-porter
and I bear down and I force and I arcane
    I omphale
Ah who leads me back toward the harpoons
    I am very weak
I hiss yes I hiss very ancient things
as serpents do as do cavernous things
I whoa lie down wind
and against my unstable and fresh muzzle
against my eroded face
press your cold face of ravaged laughter
The wind alas I will continue to hear it
nigger nigger nigger from the depths
of the timeless sky
a little less loud than today
but still too loud

and this crazed howling of dogs and horses
which it thrusts at our forever fugitive heels
but I in turn in the air
shall rise a scream so violent
that I shall splatter the whole sky
and with my branches torn to shreds
and with the insolent jet of my wounded and solemn bole

I shall command the islands to be

from *Lost Body* (1950)

△

... But There Is This Hurt

If my thought borrows the wings of the menfenil
oh faces it is clear
you are prey for my claws

and I I am prey
for the beak of the wind of doubt of the soot
of night oh cinder denser toward the heart
and this hiccup of nails driven in by the seasons

for there is this hurt
Here Lies at the height of myself
spread out in a big pool the hidden one with no undertow
when the voracious day robbed me of my odor

about this blood of mine you will say
that always at the threshold of its bitter gallop it tripped

that more just before God than their correct mouths
my lie
before his distraught face soared with a thousand
infantes out of the high sea plunging flush with the bulwarks
shaken by the original black sobbing of brambles

△

Corpse of a Frenzy

the memory of a road
rising very steeply in bamboo shade
the cane juice that invents itself always new
and the odor of mombins

the little skirts of the sea
the seasons of childhood
the parasol of coccolobes
have been left below

at the curve I turn around I look over the shoulder
of my past it is full of always not immediately comprehensible
magical and anguishing blows of breadfruit
falling and rolling down into ravines where no one finds them

catastrophe made for itself a throne perched too high
out of the delirium of the destroyed city it is my burned down life

Grief will you never
stop expecting our howling
I dreamed face twisted
mouth bitter I dreamed about all the impurities of my blood

and the ghosts roamed about with each of my gestures
at the indentation of fate

never mind it is a weakness

let my heart keep vigil
a prisoner who alone in his cell inexplicably survives the evidence
of fate
ferocious taciturn
at the very bottom a lamp lit from his horrible wound

△

I Perseus Centuplicating Myself

Make, around me, around my side,
my head, around my gnarled black heart, at the outer reaches,
your rounds, harassing with the throng of torments
my name.

Let the beak pierce, transpierce the resisting
bark. As for the rest let the clandestine termite weft
hem itself garnering the bite into the depths of the prey.

And no assault persevering in denying me a name
instead in the lymph which centuplicates me a Perseus
I run the course of the intimate pit feeding my voracious
monsters my suns and the storm beyond alburnum estimates me
out of season by tree rings
slow secretaries of a seism.

Tomb of Paul Eluard

Blazon of blows on the shattered body of dreams
first morning of snows
a very amorphous
day when all lights out
the landscape collapses
over the most distant sandbanks
the sirens of lightships have been sounding two nights
Paul ELUARD is dead

you who were the tale of innocence
who returned science to its sources
standard of the fragile seed
stronger than chance in the combat of the wind
ELUARD
neither can you lie in
nor have access to earth purer
than these eyelids
than these simple folk
than these tears
in which pushing aside the finest grass of the fog
you are walking very distant
making hands join
making paths intersect
challenging the purple word of the shipwreckers of dawn
perched on the sun

It is however much too gripping to hear you
winding up the great rose window of time
you have never been seen so clearly and so close
as in this effervescence
from the bread of snow rising when the day of settlement justifies
an abyss of silex

in the smoldering utmost depth of the compost of the storm
ELUARD
cavalier of mens' eyes for whom the watering place
in which to graze on mirage gleams, real,
gentle severe uncorruptible tough
when little by little you were dismounting
to confound by surprise
the death of the impossible and the word of spring

Commander of the goodness of bread
he passed under skies fighting
with his voice run through by the inflexible flower of the mid-day
  flail

and his step turning into bread
the future of highways
with a trembling of monsters vomited through the nostrils
demands that in the left auricle of each prisoner
all the dead wood in the world and the singing forest
blaze up as a single heart

Listen
  decoder
under your eyelids you never nighten having
in order to see night and day better
thrown to the cross fire of the cobblestone's swirls
the false fire driven out by the coronation of gems

Surveyor measurer of the wider horizon
lookout under cellars for a fire under blowholes
over grey seas greeter of most subtle flakes

oh time, opulent thanks to your tongue

at that hour the water shines man like water in the fields will shine
behold him whistle to him the docility of a leafy season

Look basilisk

the breaker of looks this very moment is looking at you
an impure evening of ice floes warmed you up in its fingers like
    the secret of summer

Reason
    what surprise of roots
    will embrace you this evening
    or the torrent
                is it possible you are already descending
    the other face of the divide
in vain a deafness thickens the nonmiraculous vigil
out of its punctured eyes the rock drives its birds

oh capricorn pack
the words their pulses beat they are known to be fabulous
sucked outside of time by an aviary hand the fallen words
gathered the seasons folded rounded like carriage gates
seasons
seasons for him wide-open

ELUARD

to preserve your body
never a climber of rituals
on the jade of your own words may you be laid down in simplicity

conjured by the warmth of triumphant life

in compliance with the operculated mouth of your silence
and the lofty amnesty of seashells

from *Ferraments* (1960)

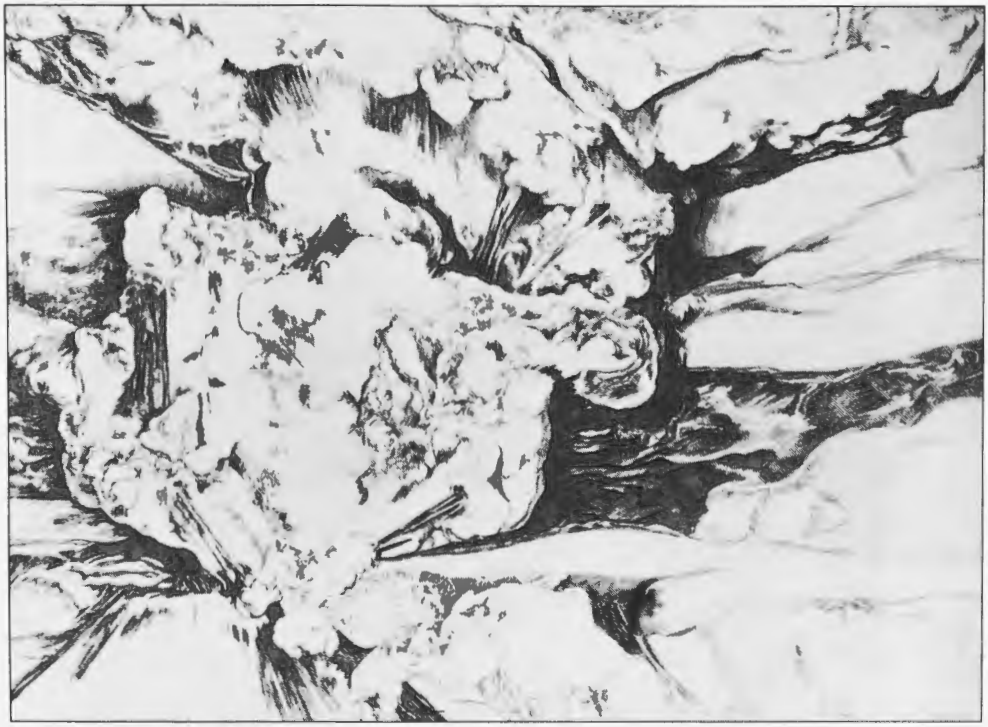
This selection of Césaire poems has been taken from "The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire (1939-1976)," translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, to be published by The University of California Press, fall, 1983.

△

NORA JAFFE

FOUR SILVERPOINT DRAWINGS

Mt. St. Helens #1, 1981



Mt. St. Helens #3, 1981

Threnody for Sunshine #3, 1981

Threnody for Sunshine #7, 1981

Bruce McClelland

Petersburg 1982

Visible silver grad & tree
the year is snow & snow is talk
the sun has set us up to here
the ancient sense of boundary
the new body of the dream kissed
woman has her luxuries, or looks
west to him who holds, this in.
It rhymes & stares at all
the strangeness morning late &
bright goes down with him is cold.
There is no stanza like the present
comfort government will say, you
live this now, & underneath.

Underneath was Peter, great below
his son knows greater than the crossless graves
& uncrossed legs the women will bring us to
the west. He knows the greater
noise is even there in music
underneath the slow slow tape
of everything forgot. It snowed & then
they learned that under it there were no
shores or bombs or friendlessness
nor tables monuments to peace
or great. No greatness there

Or on any horizon difficulty sits
an old or giant memory the sun
the crosser of our longitudes, the once
we used to kiss so long our lips would
freeze together & if we ever tried or
never did to get apart for god forbid
we'd bleed from them into the other's
do you remember gums that invasion?
How beautiful it was, the blood down the
stairs then into the square from trying
simply trying not to tell.

It all was told (they all were cold)
& hunger was a simpler need the
mouths upon a crust of sawdust
pressed so hard into wheat it would
not ever break. They never broke
the bread.

Beneath, then, the snow religion
's dream of any two of us are
doing what we want, or eating up
the upper world upon us all the
time, upon our shores. They are
not all so white that his fortress
has to stand for any place we put
the ones we would not kiss.

So let me kiss you voice &
make me cry, your sad warmth
running up & into world,
& drink it back, the salt is on
the bread is soft the water hot.

Swerves

Today on the way down a slowing down (October)
bee was watching me dying. & tested his useless
wings, no more dances but to fight the
rush of wind that reminded him of falling
only the orientation was otherwise. Just
to hold on to the side of the vehicle was to
prove it, last into October, scare the driver
(what driver) into unnecessary concern, divert
him from his course, threaten to take his body.

What body it was a car after all or shell
within a shell within shells. Within the sign
of behemoth above leviathan was the incarnate
idea of the size of the world. Measured by the
swerve.

& honey came upon it, late, afternoon,
but sweet as the cider would have been
in October, ideas lasting months now was
honey the idea.

Gustaf Sobin

Ray

1

ploughed
ice, where an
eye

swims, scarce
muscle, up
over

its
clotted ditch
(*mine,*

is mine,
would
keep saying),

ray, swung
pendulous,
through

the rusting
wind-
knotted shoots.

*

just there,
where
the instant

wobbles, bowl
the
bluejay

rims, with a
flat beat,
shatters.

*

wrinkled, the
long
rocks, the

des-
olate scales
of the

oak. unto
what, journey
where, the

wind's
nerve, light's
white

tendril

on its
hooded stave.

2

would
enter. close
on the frozen

roses of
the cabbage,
the

light, at
last, *beneath*.
o world

where the
world
went, the slack

caves
of the air, a-
gape; is

a shawl
of
burnt

crystals, spent
echoes
that's

falling
out, on-
to the lidless.

3

thread, the
sequence,
ray

welded—short
wire—to
the

washed
black
fans of the

cypress (*mine,*
is mine,
would say, a

squint leashed
to its
cold fires).

*

gather
branches; bear
stones,

bulbs, fleece...
that they
be brought,

set,
vibrant, in
sound; that

light,
unto light's
last

artifice, be
folded, its
facets

wrapped
within the
word's

cupped
shadow, and
wizened shrine.

Lauren Shakely

Five Poems

Paw-Paw Bay

It was a week of sunsets, expiring fiercely
night after night. We watched one with waiter Freddie
at the cape resort, over the heads of his buddies
butchering dolphin, slashing fillets and holding them
slippery and green for the captains holding their caps.
All week the sun sank in a burst of crystals,
boiling the sea, the jackfish leapt toward shore
at twilight, and you ran down the jetty yelling
and swinging your bait overhead. Behind you stumbled
the fat German tourist rubbing his hands (Who had ever
seen such a sea?) and Otis wailed into the advancing night
from a parked red Chevy. Trudging in the sand with the hats
and towels I admired your silhouette against the teenager's
glowing car, your mania against his deliberate languor,
your faith, like his, that in the long run
something exists to be caught.

△

Virginia Garden Week

I pull into Morven in a cloud of dust
and marvel at the blue of the Blue Ridge.

Even words sometimes tell the truth,
though they change nothing: lost on the way
found was useless, and, utterly lost,
eternity would be too much to bear.
The opportunity to read accident as failure
I welcome, my heart unfurling from crucial tension
like the azaleas that blaze here, so fierce,
so hot. While rich men rest in peace,
over their lilacs, their English box,
two butterflies twitch, circling tighter
and tighter with wings beating, and we poor folk
ask Will you take my picture so I can recall
this clear afternoon, the odor of box,
the tulips bent over backwards? and Why
does that cow keep staring? Even the balm
in *I love you* is useless today, while blame
is everywhere: the sky is blue, the mountains blue,
and I sit mute on a stump, waiting for this garden,
too, to pass.

△

Definition

After our damp skins slid apart
I nearly starved, pulling
on my mother's drained tit.
She used all her strength
to shove me out of her body,
the last link stretched, slashed,
tied in a knot I wear on the beach,
flaunting the twisted emblem

of first rejection, the eye of flesh
that saw love couldn't last.

△

The Nile of Principles

In my script the sexy wags at the ends of letters
are extensions of absurdity. A wrong number
stitches me to a flow of loneliness endless
as pharaohs picking at plaster, coalescing selves
from our miasma. But at least it's life
we didn't squeeze into being.
A woman
who likes gardening is accused of saluting
the Nile of principles, where the valley burns
deeper, greener, more perverse to have befouled
the desert with the luster of vegetation, with the
aroma of work.
On the ultimate Greyhound bus ride,
a sweating, avuncular tenderness hunches always
in the adjacent seat, a pharaoh plundering emptiness
for a reason to lean back and row. Rhythm doesn't
cancel the effort; nothing cancels fatigue; and now
the garden squares off forever, apparently
to even the score.
Still, I still
want to be a man, and am, in a sense: I am genderless
and human: each particle strains for a neat
hairline of poignancy that is the most
I'll admit to believing.

Needs

1

We came down to this water to drink,
and there was no water.
How could we blame the water
for not being there, or the place
we expected water to be for having no water?
It was our mysterious thirst,
which rose up steadily, intensely,
meaninglessly. It was the search for water,
the idea of water, the idea of idea
that drove us to this place
with our mouths stupidly open,
empty of need and the need
to describe it.

2

The idea of water,
having no particular meaning,
was not a particularly bad idea,
Looking for it, driven by desire,
was guileless. It was simply stronger
than other movements,
having moved us to this place,
giving the place meaning, not sacrifice,
but hope—the blind stupidity of innocent wandering
to places as empty as life is, of intention, good will,
as likely, unlikely, as any place
to have water.

3

Filled with the idea of water
we went looking for it, desperate
beyond intelligence, encouraged
by the seeming absence of water
to search for it everywhere.
We began to think we could drown
the need to look for it, attain
the love of emptiness,
the appreciation of beautiful
waterless places that inspired us,
from a distance, to go beyond them.
This blank, narrow space must have been
what we meant after all, since we,
with language alone, with the dry
intensity of passion,
have found it.

△

Michael Palmer

The Theory of the Flower

I will read a few of these to see if they exist
(We will translate logos as logos)

He swam in the rock
I am here from a distance

"Now kiss her cunt"
"Now take his cock in your hand"

The film is of a night garden
There is nothing meaningful about the text

There is nothing meaningful about a text
She

brushed away the sand
She brushed away the hand

This is Paradise, an unpunctuated book
and this a sequence of laws

in which the night sky is lost
and the flower of theory is a black spot

upon the foxglove
(These words have all been paid for)

He turns them to shade his eyes from the sun
She edges closer to the fallen log

This is Paradise, a mildewed book
left too long in the house

Now say the words you had meant to
Now say the words such words mean

The car is white but does not run
It fits in a pocket

He slept inside the rock,
a flower that was almost blue

Such is order
which exenterates itself

The islands will be a grave for their children
after they are done

You may use the paper with my name on it
to say whatever you want

I promise not to be so boring next time
never again to laugh and weep so much

which is how spring comes
to the measured center of the eye

The mind is made up
and then and then

This is the paradise of emptiness
and this the blank picture in a book

I've looked over the photographs and they all are of you
just as we'd been warned

How strange
The winged figure in tuxedo is bending from the waist

The metalion addresses the mirror
and the music of the shattered window

falls unheard past the window below
How strange

but not so strange as speech
mistaken for a book

The phrase "for a moment" is popular in the world
yet not really meant to be said

That is the third or the fourth world
where you can step into a tremor with your tongue

I do not drink of it myself
but intend a different liquid

clear as the glass in which it's held,
the theory of the flower and so on

or the counterterror of this valley
the fog gradually fills

just as we've been warned
It isn't true but must be believed

and the leaves of the sound of such belief
form a paradise

(pronounced otherwise)
from which we fall toward a window

Lies of the Poem

We welcomed the breeze
could not escape it

The face is turned to an idea
We will never be friends until it's done

His words are over
The false ceiling here

emits a remarkable light
The music is so-so

Were you named for the painting
of the moth of gold

or the stain on the pillow
The face is burned by an idea

cannot escape it
cannot escape or retain it

The body tends to disappear
beneath the wrapping

The ink dries
across a period of years

in which fires occur
at the midpoint between the eyebrows

La-la-la is the germ of sadness
said the speaker in sneakers

Sound decays
and then there is the story

and then the features are erased
The addition of one more chair

and the arrangement is complete
Here another festival

to which no one is invited
and where expectation plays no part

△

Clayton Eshleman

Terrestrial

ORGASM FLASHES an unprintable pattern I have glimpsed then lost. Small cysts like parachutes, or albino testes, grapes to the seeker. The earliest chakra, the Muladhara Bridge, is the place in our bodies to confront the image of a woman bundled into herself at the rise of the bridge between nature and being. The outside is faceless. Another kind of face. Ape face. Shit face. The other is an invitation. What I am not is benign, of my kind, since my kind, basically kine, floods back immediately into the unknown. To love the upside down of ourselves. My father broke out of his own "rest home" several times to seek his (dead) wife. Stole his own car keys, drove and drove. He was found once 185 miles north of Indianapolis, out of gas in someone's driveway. Dusk, near skeleton sitting in car. "I am looking for Gladys." Did he see her? Did they see him? His clothes were crawling with her, but that was no good. He wanted to be with his wife, his other, in chamber—and had she appeared, with hippo head, coming around from the back of that house, with legs he had known, walking with my mother's walk, would he have accepted "her"? Suppose she had appeared as a scorpion. "We don't understand, mister, but there

has been a scorpion on the back porch all day, flexing. Is this perhaps what you are looking for?" My father takes the beast and smashes it to his face, turns to me, ferociously saying: "as I never knew you, you never knew me." Fair enough, I respond, but go with the image... We are now in Mexico. My father's face is a mask, wood onto which a scorpion is clenched, a scorpion fornicating my father's face! About time! Flexing over his nose, as if to dip into a nostril, as if to contact the first man! As if to break my father's scrotum, to scatter the male nature of everything I touch. My poor father in Oldsmobile, shrunken lizard drifting wifeless nondeath, head stuck out—only a scorpion could cap him! My father? But about whom, really, am I speaking? My other? And now butterflies are descending, with shears, they are whistling away the flesh, so that progenitor is sheer excresence. So that what I am is excreting and growing. So that there is volume in the Oldsmobile, vast volume, so that progenitor is monkey behind, and none of this is bloody. I have kissed my father's skull and found a monkey vulva, and kissing the vulva I have tasted cave, for the first time the real taste of cave! Octopus cave crossing a savanna, its beak interior containing a monkey queen, around her, milling young monkeys, around them, agitated "guardians," in swirl, a cave octopus, disappears, in my father's face, so that father is no longer total, but amphibian, a ghost staring through reeds, and there is the burial grounds of English Literature, Wordsworth balancing the norias, in Kali form, like amusement park ride, with fiery cauldrons on each arm, dipping and loosing his molten sparks. How dense the father still is. Can I make him diaphanous? Can I ride him through to the veil? And again this counterwish: you should be making him denser if you ever want to reach that lode in which language eats through the wall of beginning to speak. Wall I seek an inner burial that is alive with the resonance of death. Wall I seek the intelligence of the combining of my father's actual bones with the terrestrial intelligence investigating his genetic marrow. Wall I want a union that has nothing to do with unity or one or solution. Wall I want to be in your

texture as one layer of the words perplexing my distance from the sorrow of individuation, for there is no such thing as the individual, nor is there any such thing as the collective. There are motions, with steel spring fingers, careful collectings as well as jeeps bursting, tiny, among the ferns, in a spacious nowhere in which your eyes Caryl are stars and are nothing and I grind my fists into my sockets to unleash the puny molten spells of bright gold swimming into the migraine centers of El Salvador.

Vision that life is benign, pronounce yourself, outside of paradise, outside of symbolism. Dear brothers, is it not time we treated our monkeys to a salad that is outside our wiles to be men? A salad in which rocks which are alive could be listened Beethovenly to, so that our digital diapers could be felt as mountains, that we might burrow through our earliest turd and open out a freshness in which all beings are friends, all beings, even these right now using us as jungle gyms. For the inner terrestrial in our garden must be greeted, and how I wither as I say this, for if others do not, what chance the tender American? Simple political horror of the five feet around me, bull's-eye each of us are in the particles of any political contract—while in the animal coalmine we are all mammal locked, eye to eye, muscle to muscle, a gravel shifting of centuries we pretend to have no knowledge of. This poetry is an attempt to think through the last glaciation, to restore memory of that which erected us. For there is a two-beat fuse ticking in life as we know it now:

1) our natal demon was to unpack from the animal to be born out of animal, as if animal was womb, and we who recall possibly an earlier birth seek like shell shocked chicks to stand free of the hair in which we were closet and cloth

2) once free, detached from our pipeline to other worlds, there is nothing to do but commit suicide. We are now in the process of killing ourselves off because we do not know how to reconnect to all of the otherness that has become our enemy.

The glass wagon boats of the dead now occasionally break through my fabric—like a wall, or my skin, but I am not afraid, since I am nothing here but a voice a tongue on the end of a pirate diving plank a spatula pressed down onto the tonsil of an older need to place stone to stone in speech to accomodate these diced eyes these seers as they break blisters, disease, as they shine in boils, dead thronged bridge, carnival in which the millions before us, inhabiting our bodies, instruct the father to know that she has no face and that his love for her is intact in my rotting shoulders. I cannot embrace him, but I can let his desire trickle through language so that anyone willing to contemplate what I say will take on the shadow of a former self and understand why his suit pockets were not filled with Woolf rocks, but chunks of salami, what the two of them called "mother's salami." His desire to feed dead Gladys meshes with my appetite for fracture like teeth into food made of teeth, the tooth food doing the chewing.

Peter Redgrove

Nine Poems

In the Pharmacy

for Wendy Taylor

A moth settled on the side of a bottle,
Covering its label, a marvel. The embroidered wings
Of the moth called Wood Leopard. It flutters off

And settles on another bottle. The label of this violet
Fluted container with the glass stopper reads
Lapis invisibilitatis: it would make you disappear.

The moth like a travelling label walks
From bottle to marble bottle with floury wings
Embracing each and tapping with fernleaf tongue

Sugared drops at neck and stopper,
Built like a fat rabbit with gaudy wings extracting
The essence of pharmacies, the compendium,

Staggering from jar to sculptured jar and sealing
Into capsules its own cogitatio,
Implicating in its eggs our explicit medicine.

And the draughts of invisibility, the poisons?
The caterpillar remembers to die
As the labelled stone declares, and disappears,

All melts to caterpillar soup inside the wrappings
Where the pupa cogitates,
Just the nerve-cord floating like a herring-skeleton,

And round those nerves lovingly unfolds
The nervous wings on which is marked
In beautiful old pharmacy script, the formula.

△

Escapology

The stone as excited by my touch as I am by its.
The hold of the prison on me weakens in the wind.
The mulberry bush in the courtyard round which they went
And round, for exercise, and round, in this new wind
Makes a wooden noise, like a hangar
Full of wooden propellors preparing to rise,
To fly and escape, many souls in the wood,
The winds scarfing from the trees, as speech from mouth to ear.

As if one should for a safe
Bury his jewels in his own body; shooting himself
In the head with his own diamonds. The tree
With upraised arms talking to me from the yard,
Striped tigerishly with bars, my only friend
That splits the flagstones and offers fruit into my hand
Through my bars; and a little prisoner has formed

In the apple of my eye, little solid photo,
Climbs up out of its plush box, an essence of me,

A free essence. The bees in the honeycombed stones
All hanging up their wings, and turning
Human faces to me, smiling, the spiders
That drape the iron bars pulling off their masks
And the bone-nosed dogs theirs, and the rain
Running with naked limbs over the barbed wire and over
the walls,
The searchlight cannot catch the rain,
Simply turns it solid white, running towards them,
The light pinioned to its generator, riveted in the rain,
My beard behind bars watching smiling independently of me.

△

Dream of a Lawn Pillow

My herb-pillow of memory-shaking smells
That as it warms begins to utter dreams,
A pillow full of lawns sings me to sleep,

These divided realities, images of each other,
Head and sleep, web and spider,
Conductor and orchestra,

One great web in two halves.
My face settles in the crinkling lawn
As though the whiteness of its linen deepened

To the whiteness of a mirror, full of light,
To the whiteness of faces, shining underground,
Like treasure, the head

Dark as a spider in its orchestrated web,
Spidery conductor, weaving between the rows,
Tall rows and hedgerows steel of gossamer

Strung between conium, hop, yarrow,
Rustling gateways in the pillow
With all their spiderwebs and balsamic seeds

Each wrinkled seed like a vase of sleep
Or head of a dead one in his seamless skin,
Seamless sleep. The unseen breezes

Hunt through the ripe grain,
Handling the masks, and relinquishing them.
Where do these torrential angels come from?

Portly seeds and vacant husks rustle in the webs.
There is a crowded room underfoot
Packed with blue flints and white chalk-stones

And silver webs of water threading through all,
Blazing with candles that are root-tips,
The waiting-room underfoot

With thicketed candelabra burning downwards
With light for the thronging crowds to tread their routes
Their faces stretched in receding ancestries

By parallel mirrors of the watery sands,

Earth candles trembling with the unseen breezes.
Now I see a spider with buttons on his back

Creeping down the tented lane,
His beast-form goes as he stands up,
He owns nothing but the tail-coat on his back,

A toothbrush and a baton in his poacher's pocket,
His flautists hanging and blowing themselves empty
And white in the rivers of wind,

Bowels white and clean as an ironed hankie,
His trombonists still fluttering bright as blown butter,
His drumskin typanist tapping to the air—

The conductor of the dead tugging with his baton
At the twice-born crammed into the soil, comprising
The lawn orchestras of my memory-shaking pillow

Of rustling sleep-herbs mouthpiece of the dead.
But I lay my head upon this silk and dryleaf pillow,
Rustling between the sheets prepared to be occupied

By some yet underground with faces still unattempted.

△

Essay

They slap the whitewash across the stone
Shuttering their cottage walls against the Devil

Who may be the black ape of the Moon
Transforming constantly into the white disc he carries,

The star-studded ape with his white-winged stick
Emptying and filling himself out of his white flask,

His soul-bottle of moonshine
That keeps the horizon of the resurrection

And shows the way
Up out of the underworld, the waterway.

The rising water-way is the way of the Gods,
Out of their tracks. Think of the snake

And of the bird. The one ripples
Through the rilling grass like green sparks

Of the water-dynamo that hums underfoot
Below the circuits of the grass; the other

Stands on nothing, volplaning, for clarity
Drenches itself in the fountains of the clouds,

Like a giant stretches up to see everything,
To snuff up everything; one may think

Always of ordinary god-creating matters: of the simple worm
That takes wings, the serpent of the moth;

Of the giant frost-winged wells of winter thawing,
The melt drumming into their depths,

The clear water sinking into its cataracts;
Of a snake that supples into streams and flies like a bird

With dazzling underwings, and alights
Glittering over the earth, ascends

Into the hand of its ape-master,
Cloudy greybeard master—that rainbow

Is the rill of his innumerable wings,
The vibration that surrounds him; think too

Of the pearl-divers among skeletons, the black women
Who climb head-down along the ladders of water,

Return with their knives in their teeth, holding up
The white round shining thing of great price.

△

A City of Churches

The inside sculpture, the winged gargoyle carvings,
The writings entered high up on the walls of stone,
The legends cast in humming bells in bronze,
The stones made of stones we call the skeleton of God,
His singing bones. The monks

Have chiselled a singing-space out of the stone
And there they sing and dine
Like hooded flies with filmy wings of song
And a glory you can hardly see

And when they die we say they fly away
Angels of themselves having earned their wings
And a glory you can hardly guess
With filmy wings hovering heavy-duty
Bottle-green bronze-shaded bodies

Of flies that transform the dung of the monastery kennels
In living glory busy about its songs
So that life shall not cease to flow singing,

And the feathered chicks shall snap them up,
The souls of monks, and the fish snap out of the pools,
And the monks dine on tench, giving thanks in song
They read off the walls high up their eyes upturned
In habits fermenting with grease a feast for flies,
As the snails retire to read
What is written on their inner scrolls
While the sun shines and glorifies everything,
And in the downpour stretch supple solo feet and glide
Covered with their own grease that shines
In the light of candleflame horns
Through the puddles with slow ripples, and how many
Of these lakeside pebbles where the swans
Glide double and snap up flyeating frogs
Is carved invisibly inside?

△

Resort

The khaki gnats hovering in their unstrung chandeliers
By the drinking fountain; I drink from its stone,

They drink; a plume of horse-gnats,
A cavalry blood-cap.

They are the ghosts of the dune-nettles,
The animal form of those plants,
Their stabbers, flying,
They drink blood to live
As all ghosts do, hovering in their blood-sconce,
Their scaffold goblet, their winged piecemeal grail.

A gnat of stone is built upon the shore,
Its moorage sticker sipping at the surf,
A restaurant in its flanks with winged verandas,

It is the spirit-pavilion where you can get a good cup of tea,

It watches the dunes where the old casinos rot,
The roulette tables and the baize baccaret tables
Half-drifted with fractured sand dealt over and over
Dwindling as it is dealt, sand like the shuffling
Dry souls of gamblers still riffling their cards
Smaller and smaller, rubbed almost to nothing,

To a few corpuscles,
Sucked dry and no use to nettle or gnat.

△

She Makes It All Up

It is well to give a dressing of soot, says the sweep.
Her sea-wet ruffles like the sea wrinkling or coral shores.

Her body is harmless and deeply mad.

He reads of the tribal women strangled
In a hut which has been built for that occasion;
She reads of the soul which is like the spheres of the moon,

But furnished on all sides with eyes. She imagines
The treasure of chalk-white silver, and earlier
The Golden Age, when the cotton grew naturally

In all colours; and moreover she stored her mind
With pleasant ideas from her dreams; as when
From the Goddess' eyes they made springs,

Fountains, and the little caves which were alive; of
The snake that appeared, with majesty
Like unto elephants; and of

The ambergris of whales, ambrosial snot;
And of the hall where hovered a hundred
In hangings of silk who began to bare

Their breasts to her, in sign of honour.
He said, you feed me thus,
I will show you my soul, in images.

It was like a desert where a heavy dew fell,
The rocks and dunes darkened in drifting shades,
Where the first sun lightened on a mat of spiders

Hitching up their threads of white silk to fly but first
To catch the dew in pearls and squatting drink them,
Drawing the bead necklaces through thin fangs to drink them.

A Touch of Drowsiness With Eyes Open

Meditating and slowed-down, the bird-calls hung about
Like open lanterns in the plane-trees
Or like shucked skins in the wooden cobwebs. A girl

In a ragged shirt came to rouse me, I saw her
Dressed like chalky England in a white shirt of wave-shock,
Woven of air and water. I put away that pillow

That sings me to sleep, the inexpensive herb-cushion
Of memory-shaking smells that takes me to pieces
With all the things that make me up

Put back into their drawers, and the sticks
Of furniture placed back against the walls,
Our convocation left, and the flesh food

Scraped off the best bone china with knives
And forks of water and of worms. It was my purpose
To retire to meditate, but it is strange.

I whitewashed my cottage, my sole precaution,
Shuttering it against the Devil, to muse
Among wonders of the mind: the great wells

Packed to the brim with crisp frost; the worm
Taking wings, the book mothworm; the butchers
Slicing their animals into succulent pages, and myself

In the stone room, praying among mica
Shored up against the traffic's endless maggot,
Praying that it shall not take wings against us

Dropping its eggs that bring life back to fire,
Life that in its beauties is slow fire:
Slow fire even the white frost, the shirt of flesh,

The wooden cobwebs of autumn,
And the open lanterns hanging in them which are birdcries.

△

Export

The bales of wool turned entirely to moths,

Export of moth-bales, packed with large wholesome
Muscular caterpillars and shiny
Sculpted chrysalids that split

As you are discussing them or turning them over
With your ashplant, that then splits down its length

Also, and there are yellow wings struggling in the wood,
In the core of the long-dead tree; the thick-fringed wings
Struggle out like antimacassars or victorian beaded curtains,

They are as if dressed in animal nightgowns
Wetted in a sea-breeze, birth-wet, sun-drying among dunes,
Their watch-spring faces peacefully bespectacled
Ready and eager to fly the ocean on their fat
On the fat of their caterpillars, ready to mate

And slide out egg-rafts like open boxes of syrupy beads.

△

Dennis Phillips

Self-Portrait

You. Your attentions. What others say in empty halls
of no concern but where's your recompense Do
they recall your fine manner or deft art in the conferences Where
are you when these things happen?

So detailed attention to the effects of doors, rain, ocean
there *can* be a debate inside you.

Roughness and electrical affinity may mark your hovering what
else would concern you?

*

You rain-procuring mercenary whose *true* claim we disbelieve.
Dracaena stump expected to blossom tropical in a water jar
on your oak desk the structure of which
conjecture causes your anxiety to see a poor cat
legless, placed in a thimble, faced toward a window that
views fern forest, to wait and look as if you saw
some other significance in so pathetic a scene
as if it were ungenuine, too soft against the rock-hard
vision you seek and so include various hardware
and a backdrop of urbane holidays in tropical settings.

*

You ask why you can't simply make beautiful things the
world you're capable of invoking in itself is moving and then
you become restless and picture the wingbeats and accompaniment
of *Sunday Morning* and know the answer and settle again
for what you demanded or were handed or
what always comes up there's no way of ensuring a result
or a conversation later you'll probably not hear it
or the alternative (you fancy eavesdropping after death) of hearing
them talk about you would be in the context of a world that
must negate the thrill of being remembered.

*

If the picture of a cord and rope comes into this it's with
a sense of release not bondage as though
the twisting structure of rope or cord is a pathway not
a prison and if Wittgenstein says that philosophy
must be as complex as the knots it seeks to unravel
then poetry must *be* the knot, beautiful and impossible
that instead of needing to be untangled,
of its own accord blooms.

Dream of Ocean with Doors

This dream riddled with doored openings at night
when you fall overboard no one hears you.
In the morning your scream has cooled and merged.

It would be up to you to float calmly, waiting,
or seek one of the doors,
but then rescuers would find nothing
that would matter your choice more final
than their worst fears.

This dream is a hard test.
It is a dream where you say again and again
"This is not a dream. This is waking.
Only in waking can this be said."
You see a deep channel
and in the pulsing waters doors.

He would say later
about her hips
or about the line of belt resting on her hips or about
the ridgepole of her pelvis
he would say, about that section
he dreamed of, stopped working because of,
later, he would say.

Normal advice is heard and considered.
A salute to a landscape that appears in dreams
but won't become solid in memory. Normal. As if quantity.

That her hips held him
fixed, transfixed.
He'd say that all hormones and instinct
were summarized in one curve of flesh.

Not absent perhaps misperceived. A quartet of missing notes.
But the music was scored for solo instrument.
How democracy is lost. As if quantity.

He would say later, about her hips, about how they stirred him.
He would recall a feeling of moot protest, product of obsession.
As if.

If he could find her, but it's written solo

only her, part for hips. "I think I'm ugly,"
she'd say remembering a scene not related but tenacious
so that during all crucial moments, when answers
decisions, commitment must be made,
the image of a long blue pool, surrounded by starlets and gigolos,
with summer waiters in short white coats attending,
with no shade anywhere, with the very faint
smell of chlorine and the dissipated arctic of really good
air conditioning
would grasp her mind.

She would wonder later why she was the prisoner
of a hotel she had never seen.

△

JOHN MANDEL

FOUR GRAPHITE DRAWINGS

愛情只
一下子的

Punk Rock

Poland can go to hell!
I have an act, Polonius,
that will twist your tail.
By burning, I become a symbol,
but not seriously...
we have come too late
to be serious...
an act, Polonius,
for killing two birds,
matter & anti-matter,
with one stone, wackery.

wacky wackhead wackery

As it lay amort, the voice
of my spirit cried,
"Absent thee
from the real brimstones awhile.
Neither serious
nor lyrical be."

Hence nothing I do
makes any difference.
But I have an ear
for the Heretical Imperative.

My cockatoo's gone mad.
He's trying out a new
art form: conniption
to the power of X
and genitals as actors,
claiming Rimbaud's space
and all its perquisites.
It takes a demon now
to hold Persephone.

A fart.
And the reply:
"I hear you calling me."

The people can go to hell
The reader can go to hell

O to be a tiger
by the principle thereof!
to stalk the avant garde
the fictive
and still burn bright

tiger, tiger,
heartless, modish,
singular.

I've lost Polonius,
my adversary,
and the larks.

△

John Ashbery

37 Haiku

Old-fashioned shadows hanging down, that difficulty in love
too soon

Some star or other went out, and you, thank you for your book
and year

Something happened in the garage and I owe it for the blood
traffic

Too low for nettles but it is exactly the way people think
and feel

And I think there's going to be even more but waist-high

Night occurs dimmer each time with the pieces of light smaller
and squarer

You have original art works hanging on the walls oh I said edit

You nearly undermined the brush I now place against the ball
field arguing

That love was a round place and will still be there two years
from now

And it is a dream sailing in a dark unprotected cove

Pirates imitate the ways of ordinary people myself for instance

Planted over and over that land has a bitter aftertaste

A blue anchor grains of grit in a tall sky sewing

He is a monster like everyone else but what do you do if you're
a monster

Like him feeling him come from far away and then go down to
his car

The wedding was enchanted everyone was glad to be in it
What trees, tools, why ponder socks on the premises
Come to the edge of the barn the property really begins there
In a smaller tower shuttered and put away there
You lay aside your hair like a book that is too important to read now
Why did witches pursue the beast from the eight sides of the country
A pencil on glass—shattered! The water runs down the drain
In winter sometimes you see those things and also in summer
A child must go down it must stand and last
Too late the last express passes through the dust of gardens
A vest—there is so much to tell about even in the side rooms
Hesitantly it built up and passed quickly without unlocking
There are some places kept from the others and are separate, they never exist
I lost my ridiculous accent without acquiring another
In Buffalo, Buffalo she was praying, the nights stick together like pages in an old book
The dreams descend like cranes on gilded, forgetful wings
What is that past, what is it all for? A mental sandwich?
Did you say, hearing the schooner overhead, we turned back to the weir?
In rags and crystals, sometimes with a shred of sense, an odd dignity
The boy must have known the particles fell through the house after him
All in all we were taking our time, the sea returned—no more pirates
I inch and only sometimes as far as the twisted pole gone in spare colors

So Many Lives

Sometimes I get radiant drunk when I think of and/or look at you,
Upstaged by our life, with me in it.
And other mornings too
Your care is like a city, with the uncomfortable parts
Evasive, and difficult to connect with the plan
That was, and the green diagonals of the rain kind of
Fudging to rapidly involve everything that stood out,
And doing so in an illegal way, but it doesn't matter,
It's rapture that counts, and what little
There is of it is seldom above board,
That's its nature,
What we take our cue from.
It masquerades as worry, first, then as self-possession
In which I am numb, imagining I am this vision
Of ships stuck on the tarpaper of an urban main,
At night, coal stars glinting,
And you the ruby lights hung far above on pylons,
Seeming to own the night and the nearer reaches
Of a civilization we feel as ours,
The lining of our old doing.

I can walk away from you
Because I know I can always call, and in the end we will
Be irresolutely joined,
Laughing at this alphabet of connivance
That never goes on too long, because outside

My city there is wind, and burning straw and other things that
don't coincide,
To which we'll be condemned, perhaps, some day.
Now our peace is in our assurance
And has that savor,
Its own blind deduction
Of whatever would become of us if
We were left alone, to nurture on this shore some fable
To block out that other whose remote being
Becomes every day a little more sentient and more suavely
realized.
In the meantime there are so many things not to believe in
We can make a hobby of them, as long as we continue to uphold
The principle of private property.
So what if ours is planted with topiary tin-can trees?
It's better than a forest full of parked cars with the lights out,
Because the effort of staying back to be with someone
For whom number is everything
Will finally unplug the dark
And the black acacias stand out as symbols, lovers
Of what men will at last stop doing to each other
When we can be quiet, and start counting sheep to stay awake
together.

△

Penelope Shuttle

Four Poems

Childless

While picking these blackberries
I think of the brilliant diseases
of horses.

I think of the roots of trees
turning away from light
into darkness, like hard lessons
in a foreign tongue.

Later, at the blue window,
I advance by inches towards October.
The seabirds unwind their hoaxes
in the sky

and the taste of blackberries
turns to evening,
bony, equine, dark.

△

The Pretty Worm

'Hast thou the pretty worm of Nilus there...'

One summer I dreamt
I kept a snake for my pet.

He moved with the ease of fire.
He was a soul of fertility,
more pliant than the birds
as they turn and wheel in the air.

I loved the cool clarity of the asp.

Coiled, he slept
as if at the floodmark of the uterus.

I fed him on saucers of milk,
my immortal, my baby.

One day, being clumsy, I spilt the milk,
and he hissed, silver rage...

I froze
and all my memories trembled.
How to escape his fatal kiss,
the foetal grace of his venom?

His antique tongue stroked the air:

'the snake who knows no charm'.

I grasped him by his throat.

He turned to rope and bound me fast,
my nipple the knot.

△

The Child Stealer

Gossip, pure gossip,
words to be sewn on tight.

Behind the door,
a phlegm of yearning and terror.

A line of victims, waiting.

Out fall the babies.

Late at night, doors and windows
fly open to let her in,
the child stealer.

Gossip, only gossip.
Afraid of the ache?
It goes deep.

Who can bear to be
where the dark lives, is born
among strangers?

Out fall the babies.
Out of the pattern.
Out of the circle.

Lost forever.

Out of the light.
Out of the mirrors.

Into the dark.
Lost forever.

They fall out of the women
on to the trembling pavement.

Why?
Blood rushes away with the answer.

△

Locale

Should I know this room,
this firmament?

Outside, a bedridden climate,
rain, cloud, undrinkable dark.

Always this wrong weather
draws me down into its poverty,

strips me of all but weariness.
Should I know this room?

Yes, this is the room
of all that is unfinished.

No mirrors on the wall,
for here no woman is fair.

How familiar it seems,
how short a time since my last visit,

the furniture frosty with dust,
the bedding damp,

the room unlit, raw,
my persistent prison.

I am captive, held between
the belly of one dark

and the thigh of another...

What will free me,
unlock the door of this slum?

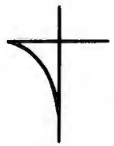
Only pure and bitter blood,
the shorn fleece of the womb.

George Economou

AMEPIKH TWO

IV

More than a child, less
than a woman, *as a weed*
Flung from the rock on Ocean's foam to sail
(aboard the *SS Byron*)
Where'er the surge may sweep, the tempest breath prevail
direct from Piraeus to New York,
from there by rail to Montana,
she crossed herself
and crossed herself
and crossed herself again
as her life's line crossed
with America's rivers:



the Hudson
Susquehanna
Allegheny
Maumee
St. Joseph
Kankakee
Illinois
Wisconsin
Mississippi
Minnesota

Red
Souris
(what did Cokboy think
when he heard this one?)
the Milk
(along the Hi-Line OK had helped lay)
and at the place of its cataracts,
the river whose name in Greek
sounds like "smudge."
At the great falls
of the Missouri then
it would begin
under the auspice of $5
found in the train seat,
foretelling a full measure of days
poured into the new mold of earth
water & sky—
days that would fly
as if metered by the train's
clickety-clacks through the lane
of fence-posts & wires
flashing by like a song
on destiny's lyre—

a triumph?
(if it can ever be said to be)
of the active life:
Martha, Μάρθα
thou art care-full & troubled about many things
μεριμνᾶς καὶ τυρβάζη περὶ πολλά
the priest's intoning of the Lord's
words fluttering like moths round
her light head filled with signs
and fetching anticipations...

V

If the Long Time Sleeping Elizabeth
that lives in Browning,
as in the directory
for North Central Montana,
could live here,
as in the directory of Whitman's all night vision,
for the red squaw, beloved of his mother,
that *never came nor was heard of there again*—
then the one, all name, for the other with none
that substantiated absence
would together
make a presence.
As any cherished
you that has passed among us,
now listed among the missing,
that presence of mind resettles
for good in black and white
so does this presence of theirs
appear
to pioneer behind chosen fronts.
But when it comes
it comes in blue
wisps of necrangelic smoke,
a blue
figure that starts the eye
with its annunciation:

"You see, because you are big with me
I am sown with the sounds of your voice.
Dressed am I thus
and leap
in your presence."
Once seized
such service remains,
directs the names
of long time sleepers
to those that are coming.

△

Jerome Rothenberg

The Covering Cherub & The Academy of Dada

for B., among the minim

"I will destroy thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire."

— EZEKIEL XXVIII: 16

1

under the angel's wing
the cherub's head
still cries
it is the babe of Schwitters' column
the last to stay
it stays here
stripped of its hair
my melancholy angel cherub
with peacock's mouth
disturbed by dream who bellows
like cow or cormorant
bladder of the female beast
elusive feathers
stuck to its gauzey skin
to keep us from our body's
image it becomes
the head seen by the Senecas

in flight
the sacred yo-yo
we steel ourselves against
but feel
sting of its prickly cheeks
over our nipples
weakened
shoved to the darkest wall
the cherub has no eyes
he says the cherub
is no sparky lady I have known
forever waited for her
called her my muse
the battle to the death is with
the cherub death
the angel death resembles
it is the babe lost in the wood
the babe's head
mangled angry fetus
screaming for death among the outlaws
priests of the academy
of DADA exile
is the true pain
that the cherub death leads to death
is in his language
but beside the cherub stands
the other the false cherub
that the cherub will become
now that the cherub is
too weak to speak it
his words a shadow of his words
a cat-light glowing
like babe made out of words

the cherub vomits
sadly
into the cherub's death

2
THE ACADEMY OF DADA

knows not Alexandria nay nay nor Athens
knows not even deluxe prime puritan hotshot miltonic
mudcats, these the ACADEMY OF DADA
knows not nor knows the academy nay nay
why some cherubic jewboys seek out the gentile lights
to illumine therewith the jewish darkness blind synagogue
lonely among their throngs nay nay the ACADEMY OF DADA
knows not such pith yet knows it Tzara's ghost in oldtime Dada
journeys
landeth in Zurich schoolboy-fresh another midget oriental
Dada disgust foretold erupts his spontaneity against
the bandit killers who suck from our still throats
what honeys! precious pollens he restores to earth
ferocious unrequited Sammy Rosenstock who standeth hatless
among the goyim terrors of the nation-
state the cherub is who is true cherub
but the ACADEMY OF DADA
knows not the least green vales of England nor knows cathedral
bells
ding dong it is the first academy without a book
only the sky a solitary Dada cloud pinned to its cardboard
crying: death to alabaster!
long live the ACADEMY OF DADA!
tra la its priests poach from each other's pockets, singly

singingly they bang on their computers
light up like soft machines bounce b.b.s over metal counters
acrobats slide down academic tubes the ACADEMY OF DADA
knows not umbrellas neither knows it love in bloom
nay nay nor bloom in love yet croons still over Anna Blumë
day by day over Rrose Selavy by night & knows not
where the cherub walks planting amid his trees the fear of Dada
Dada knows not but knows each is his own Dada
each wears a Dada hat that shines
like Dada symphonies
& Dada ice-creams
each brings his Dada song alive where Dada
knows not Dada lives on in spirit of the world
o freedom of the mind the line o freedom of the heart
from hunger solitude
(he cries)
"to free the forces of poesis from
"the gods of power
"let the cherub's wing fall pull
"the cherub through the mud of paradise
"out of the sacred grove

△

Lyn Hejinian

Nine Poems

The inanimate are rocks, desks, bubble,
  mineral, ramps. It is the concrete being
that reasons. The baseboard weighing
its wall span. The clouds never form regiments
  and don't march. The gap in my education
needn't be filled. Stubbornness is provocative.

The pessimist suppresses a generous anger. A trace
  linked to a fence of forgetting. Lying awake
may serve the purpose that dreams do. In the dark
opaque disposal of the missing past. Canned laughter
  is white noise. Comparable repositories of freight dust
into the shadows. Anger is the animate of stubborness.

△

Rain on the macadam quaver ticks.
The lay of the land is armed
with its pattern of occupancy.
Landscape depends on sequel, is romantic ground
in a context of necessity. Polish tinfoil
with pennies and make silver.

Windows upon close inspection swing, medaled
with the setting. Highlights work
back and forth, relocate to swap greenery.
The finished man is horizontal, a cliche.
The watch hand is a pointer
through thick lenses on a setting.
Statues have status in the park.
All one can do is go around them, directed
by the curve. Return to lengthwise.

△

Under the radio roof, a mere wisp
from witchcraft to medicine. An expectant melismata
squandered. The landscape flushes green.
How many plants compound clarity.
Low windows run the simile; only the word brick
in the description. The limits of the sky in scattered light
refer to clouds reflecting in a creek.
The remote present (as of now)
in a compass wall, glass. The rigid side
of a hedge. The proven mobile home
takes to a country surface. The bullseye darts aside.
The advantage of a double horizon
is a temporary description, a split or repercussion
in the fitting home as of a boat at sea
which floats by drawing nearer. Only the word brick
is accurate in the dramatic banter, in that timidity
of intellect where everything is relevant.

△

The blue-green northeast lake props its aureole.
False front of hill approach
mounted horizontal outcrop. Yodelling vanquishes care.

A plant sports forth in bud
above the harbor salvo. Substantiating facts leap
thin taste in the tin of shade.

Lumbers buried in weeds.
Overhead countryside built in the western vagueness.
The bird's flight is a concave arc.

A flying running band of clouds
dents the line along the horizon's imperfect meeting space,
prospects of unpopulated chances.

A gravely regular scratch in a nutshell,
these colors on the inside. A daydream
in the miniature exemplified by the weed.

△

It rained all afternoon. Plots abut
the milk of glass leveled along an oblong
green. The glare throws shadows in odd directions,
shakes the distinctive shimmer. The sky removes

absolutism with changing moods, of wool and gold.

A dirty secondary heap has for its object
mutual assistance. A link with the staggering store
is forged. The minimally knotted walls prop
the description. Specifically the general type
is pierced by its phenomena.

Dry days are bright in the mornings
in ganglions. The instant blinks, the eye
not merely flat. They take unnecessary steps to cover
the traces they haven't left. One sees
how they come out.

The dogged sunniness shines. The light scatters
shadows it couldn't cloud over the corner.
A mall, slim, abuts the public sidewalks.
Vacant lots, money aprons, prostrate trunks portion
off the shore.

△

Mental watchdog, the brainstorm's over,
a lodestar's in the mist.
New uses for a fluid masonry.
Glass mouthless, an honest stone,
all musical strings running mirrors.
Rooms at all odds of identity
are within them over a giant tempo
running torpor in subsidence time.

Life for its advantages almost rises
visible feet. Raised shadow without clouds
of mass fecundity. Those that shine back
fling relatively local blanks
between the hand and sidewalk.
The eyes as the bird flies averted
face to the regular article
there though the thought turn them.

△

The lighter the sky the less depth is apparent.
Baffled by pennies—chummily random.
Lodged in the page a maze come fugitive.
Water fills the stalk. A mild hour
in a sunlit hollow stop.

Reversible shadows in a hole. Mere understanding
is not distancing. Thick physics
watching a craze pitched
are objective. A perfect impasse as wallow
in a stadium of metal.
Self defense moves air aside. Distortion
renders it suspect. Intelligibly as obstacles
curiously swollen realism and broken brickwork.

The mechanical overflows romantic precincts.
An unruly yellow countryside.
The enginery running white noise
crosses a resolve, presumably benevolent. The sky

drew unversed inspiration. The hours were brief
to match the shortening days.

△

The tidal throughway from a distance
dispersing everything sloppy, anything
resembling an excessive spell. All that's left
is lambent, like lakes. One misses
the remarkable detail of continuity.
Light devours the visible world.
A slack windsock, sole identified sequence.

The garrulous landscape is stoked
and synoptic; the synonym list
is doggedly on plot, gleaming
in the sunlight, husbanded with enchantment.
The glass on the way down flowers. I did
or am doing in common speech fully informed,
unafraid of repetition in the same person.

△

pandemonium hews
no clouds

wakefulness
is active

one is a statistic
an ideal of exhaustiveness

it meets this
precise redundant limbo

stars of keyholes
laud the rain cloud

shapes sloshing
off an awkward clay

a sea that only scatters
in a halfbox

the gloss of observation
in the dark

the sounds are in the ears
a prima ragged brio

mute water crashes rise
in a cloud

△

Miroslav Válek

Killing Rabbits

Translated from Czechoslovakian
by Káca Polàckovà

On Sunday after breakfast
when air is halfway to ice and
thin flutes of mice squeak in the chimney
on Sunday after breakfast
to walk on virgin snow to the hutches.
For the pink rite to remove your gloves,
to stick them on the picket fence
like freshly severed palms
and to blow smoke through the wire net door.
Then to insert a searching hand
and speak sweet words through smoke-stained teeth,
cajolery, fine words,
to pity a bit,
to grab the skin firmly
and to lift it from the cozy straw.

On Sunday after breakfast
to sniff ammonia.

With your left hand to hold the head down,
watch the ears turn purplish,
tenderly to stroke the nape,
blow on it
and suddenly with the right to strike the nape.

Once more to feel on your hand the pushing off
for the unrealized leap,
to feel a heaviness in your hand,
sweetness,
to hear rabbit heaven open
and big clumps of fur falling down.

Viennese blue,
Belgian giant,
French baran
Bohemian skewbald dappled,
but even the mongrel with all kinds of blood,
each dies as fast as the next
and without a word.

On Monday to have rings under your eyes, silent,
on Tuesday to consider the lot of the world,
on Wednesday and Thursday
to invent the steam engine
and discover stars,
on Friday to think of other
but mainly blue eyes,
all week to pity orphans
and admire flowers,
on Saturday to scrub yourself pink
and fall asleep on her lips.

On Sunday after breakfast
to kill rabbits.

Miroslav Válek was born in Tvnava, Czechoslovakia, in 1927. He has edited various literary magazines, such as *Mladá Tvorba* and *Rombold.* In 1969 he was appointed Slovak Minister of Culture. This poem is from *Nepokoj* (Unrest), 1963.

Charles Stein

The Lions

for Lou Kleinsmith

In the kingdom of the bowels that is language...

the animal
chasing itself

nature consuming nature

"serpents that eat the darkness
out of the burning stones"

as if for sure I had been there...

Not true. I have. And am.

small sounds rising from themselves...

the last blue cornflowers of October...

The kindness and concern it has
is that it relinquish
all projection of itself
if only called back to its own.

The intricate fictions desire their own surcease

when faced with The Lake.

There are continuous gradations of enclosure but truly...

as if this sudden silent rock of moon

had many names

That which stands against

continuous with its distance from the eye

in the light of further enquiry.

Dictum: language

including both whereof it speaks

space, dense with responsibility

head full of stones

•

In the turbidity
yet it grows.
So events of the day
are shadows too
and the figures which arrive in many dreams
events with their own pertinacity,
not just that they *produce.*

•

In every coming forth
what goes away,
opposite but not equal, probably more...

The woman in the many photographs
with the false name

the transformations manifest in "life"

the colored force
becomes a slightly different
colored force

the gentle surface of an infinite sphere

alone in the soiledness

in the tawdry racks

If some *"it"*

is *"there"*

we never get there.

Nobody is standing
under the rain of living apples

the little bells
correlate the falling yods

The lions resolve to live apart from lions.

They are a hoard
of lions

before they are themselves, autonomous,

even granting a more than conventional regalism to *each*

in his collective *what*...

That that *"it"*

is just some *"what"*

I am as stars

or snow

walking in back of the universe

surely there must be some elephant

certainly a cow

among the monuments

at the bottom of the breath

the blackness of night and the stars of night

reach

into the thickness and the things

plummeting the still morass

a doubling back

"AUM"

to neutralize

"Ma.a.a..."

curious wavering

over a surface of water

in a quieting bowl

the broken leaves and other autumnal debris

swirl with inertial particularity

and come to rest

absolute sadness accumulating its need of dead

the ancient halls

accumulate the figures from our own

cohabitations with them

being in the world

He is accumulated into the presence of himself
his eternal Ka
discoursing with the others
in a night of grief

The movement to make it more
succeeds
abandoning itself
until what remains alone is that which was
to be attained
and the motion though swift and sure
proceeds from a certain propulsion
that is less than minimal

Slow
    as stars
        appear
in this very body
            the unstable
majesty
        no need to tell
        but in the need to tell

gold of no gold

The covert-overt
reverses the cover

and all there is

accumulates in just this one

selecting it

from multiple facets of it

releasing the subject

in a vastness of noises

which are quiet in totality

but yield these small

illusionary pips

one by one

Becomes himself

and loses himself

releases the fundamental

from its walking and its plunder

and thus releases the plundered

fellows of its wandering

into the simultaneous and alone

from which he comes

the single eaglets
in the chalky boughs

the rapid mouse
and his paths between big reed bulbs

dots on earthy tablets

rocks in the hills

that same old dog alone along the roadway

the naked shirt
wagging at the lions

the lions
seated on the porch
with loose and golden boney shoulders pointing
across the reeds
to the hills

the broken hills
rounded, then cut, a flat table
at the top of several of them
rough and grey

the one huge mountain

the green sky

Walking all that immense distance
for incredible numbers of years
three Buddhist Aeons
towards the water
pointing to it
seeing a barge
across the horizon
with a cloud-like skull
floating over the flatness
and the slowness
and the motion
of the barge
heavy yet
afloat
across the water
already there
yet walking
to meet himself

grasping himself beforehand in a bizarre
concordance of pictures
before his mind

a dog
walking nervously
becomes a lion
walking deliberately
an elephant
walking solemnly
becomes a boy
on a beach

whale hulks ride in from the foam
and the most difficult thing about them is the stench
of death by water

the bones become language itself
unanimously arching over man

taking all of us up in its colossal superstructure

confounding our being in its intricate hypotaxis

floating up ominously

it is impossible to tell just what it keeps afloat

lifting each in its levity

the strange sun setting in the west beyond the water
rises
because we approach it at such speed

it is a lion

and it opens its fiery mouth

a black dot growing huge at the center of the sun

inhaling the fumes of whales

on the isle below

safe

for a stay

we are deposited

△

BOOK REVIEWS

Little Books/Indians. HANNAH WEINER.
Roof. 1980.
Nijole's House. HANNAH WEINER.
Potes & Poets Press. 1981.

by RON SILLIMAN

These works represent a major departure from *Clairvoyant Journal*, the long prose "diary" for which Hannah Weiner is best known (even though only fragments of the *Journal* have thus far appeared, most usefully in book form from Angel Hair). What comment there has been on Weiner's writing has focused largely on the claim to clairvoyance, specifically on the capacity to *see words*, figured with the qualities of light or of such substances as pencil or dog fur. Unfortunately, such comment tends to obscure the essential fact that these works *are writings*, literary productions rigorously following all the demands posed by the questions of their composition to a unique and rich result. For example, the very multiplicity of voices in the *Journal* explores the problem of the constitution of an authorial subject (whether conceived as persona, voice or, to use a term which Weiner almost never resorts to in her "memoir," *I*) as fully as the analytical/exemplificative strategy used by Charles Bernstein in *Controlling Interests*, the deconstruction through form of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* or the intersubjective reversals that Steve Benson builds into the pronouns of *Blindspots*. And by its very status as "diary," the *Journal* insists even more clearly than Hejinian that this issue is not simply a problem of contemporary existential intellectualism, but compellingly at the center of our very lives.

The *Journal* is also a major consideration of such issues as representation, narrative continuity versus simultaneity, the directionality of the line, the page (*specifically* the 8½ by 11 inch page) as compositional space or stanza, and the function of prosody within prose. The interruptions imposed on the text by the inclusion of "seen words" work to break the flow of syntax and thought more powerfully than a space will "break" a line, yielding a

"thought fragment" as a measure of quantity, simultaneously enabling the inclusion of multiple narrative/expository/discursive threads in a manner which becomes utterly readable once the reader gives her- or himself *permission* to make active decisions in the consumption of the text. In no other recent work is the reader's place as collaborator as tangible as it is in the *Journal*.

In *Little Books/Indians* and *Nijole's House*, Weiner returns to the poem as form, i.e., the line, informed still by the inclusion of "other" data, a doubling therefore of the interruptive process at the heart of prosody. And yet, as she states in "Little Book 115: Virgin," these works are considered by her to be "prose," perhaps in the same sense that she has elsewhere referred to the *Journal* as "a novel." All writing makes present to its readers the intense activities of the mind, although some genres, such as journalism and realist fiction, tend to efface the traces which lead back to the author. In fact, it is precisely the existence of genre, purely a social convention, which carries any finished text *away*, however small a distance, from the presentness of activity, as such. We might say, therefore, that genre presents the inverted face of an authorial subject. From this perspective, Weiner's ambivalences, displacements and disruptions of genre form (to the extent that, in some places "t"s are not crossed or the top portions of words disappear) reinforce her critique of the voices which operate through her to construct "a self."

Of the poems or prose works in *Little Books/Indians*, the only one short enough to quote here by way of example is "Little Book 138 Pedro April 30 79," which is among the least disruptive typographically. Like most of the little books (so called because the original versions were composed in the 29¢ "pocket memos" from which the volume derives its cover design), this piece begins from an event out of Weiner's experience working with the American Indian Movement, the incarceration of Leonard Crow Dog:

> THEY TOOK ME
> into a prison cell
> & tormented me
> for quite a while
>
> LEONARDS STORY
>
> I ams chained

WHO BELIEVES IT
  MARY DOES
she can feel
the pinches
BIG TOE HEALS
Leonard's prison term

stupid dear an old
crime
He was tormented stupid
and I THREW IT UP
because he couldnt
THAS A TRICK
write for Big Deal
now one week
lost
SOS I SPEAK

WHO CHEATS
  amongst the Indians
    SIS IM SCARED
Only a Guru can
CHEAT LIKE LEONARD
he's full of shit too
caress him
HANNAH STOP
WRITING IT IN

This is very nearly a meditation on the old line about poetry being a "kind of lie," that would permit one to see the truth more clearly. Although Weiner often seems to describe her composition/transcription practice otherwise, it appears evident that the disruption of voices and the disruption of typography are not identical. In fact, this divergence gives Weiner one set of rhythms based on the ear, or at least syntax, and another based on the eye. The multiplicity of voices often gives particularly charged terms, such as *CHEATS*, an increased sense of instability, since it is not evident what the relation of intention between the writer and the term might be. Weiner adds to this volatile affect by undermining the typographic integrity of individual words, a device which is associated in this piece with the presense of "s". This sets up the several meanings of *SOS* (so, help, and, three lines later, *SIS*), an instance of

more than one "voice" inhabiting a single term. The "unstable s" also permits Weiner the irony of elegance in the word *amongst* in the same passage.

Just how far the *Little Books* differ from the address of the *Journal* is best registered, I suspect, by the presence of the "I". This is a discourse posed to an other far more than the "diary" mode of the earlier work in which the author must also inhabit the role of "a reader." Perhaps this also explains the use of the poetic line, in which a stop is marked not by the presence of other information but by a graphic silence. Typographically, the first two sections of this volume represent Weiner's most extreme investigation of word and line without ever falling into the stasis of "concrete" poetry.

Nijole's House is a much quieter and less disrupted text than *Little Books* or the *Journal*, an extended writing in verse form composed at a single location. Although it is the closest presentation of a "single" voice to be found in any of Weiner's publications over the past decade, the unsigned preface states that "*All* the words in this book were seen by Hannah Weiner first on her forehead" (emphasis mine), which is the first time this particular claim has been raised. While her other books have been fragmentary compilations selected from much larger writings (the selection of the *Journal* which Tom Ahern published as a chapbook contained all three pages of May 9, 1974, while the Angel Hair edition omits the first page), this volume has a sense of completion and closure to it not to be found elsewhere in her work. Even at 18 pages, its extension as a unit of writing goes beyond what is to be found in *Little Books/Indians* and most of the *Journal*, with the possible exception of the "Retreat" section of the Angel Hair volume. Its distance from the norms of her work highlights the shape, depth and thoroughness with which Weiner operates in all of her writing. ∆

Modernism and Negritude. The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire. A. JAMES ARNOLD.
Harvard University Press. 1981.

by ANNETTE SMITH

Although various Nobel committees have so far bypassed him, the French Martinican poet and statesman, Aimé Césaire (b. 1913), has often been hailed the most important living Black writer in the world. The liveliness of Césairian studies is evidenced by Thomas Hale's exhaustive bibliography of Césaire and by almost ten years of *Cahiers Césairiens*. Yet a comprehensive and thorough study of Césaire in English was still lacking—a gap which A. James Arnold's *Modernism and Negritude* fills admirably. Its convenience for the English-speaking public is not its only virtue: no other book plunges as deeply into the roots of Césaire's poetry, situates it better in contemporary letters or leaves us with a more up-to-date picture. It also is the only study to follow closely the chronological development of Césaire's career: the quasi prodigious apparition on the literary scene of the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* * in 1939, the aesthetic and ideological definition undertaken in the journal *Tropiques* (1941-1944), the largely surrealistic *Miraculous Weapons* in 1946, the struggle between poetics and politics increasingly present in the subsequent collections, *Solar Throat Slashed* (1948), *Lost Body* (1950), and *Ferraments* (1960). The chronological approach and Arnold's occasional use of Césaire's textual revisions make one thing clear: this poetry is not written from the gut as its very profusion might lead a superficial reader to believe. On the contrary, revisions generally move away from Freudian self-indulgence or from automatic writing towards tight thematic and metaphorical constructs—both within individual poems and within the collections.

While the negritude theme has fascinated readers for the past several decades, this volume's major contribution is to give the final jolt that takes Césairian criticism away from this orbit and propels it into the (probably) wider orbit of modernism. Thus, Arnold's concept responds to what Césaire

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* I am using the Eshleman-Smith translation of the titles as they will appear in Aimé Césaire: *The Collected Poetry 1939-1976* (University of California Press, 1983).

himself has said in various interviews: that it had been by borrowing European techniques that he best expressed his Africanism, and that it is through the particular (in this case the negritude material) that one goes to the universal (a modernistic vision of the world).

Arnold's study nevertheless makes ample room for the African components in Césaire's art, starting with the notion of negritude itself found in several African ethnographers, of whom the most seminal for Césaire and his friends was Frobenius. Connections with African myths and rituals and with Caribbean folklore are covered more concretely than in other studies. A detailed and illuminating analysis of the poem "Lost Body" proves, in fact, Césaire's desire to "Africanize" the text by meshing together "barbarous" sounds and themes. But this is precisely an excellent example of how far one can go in this direction; for as convincing as it is, the technique Arnold demonstrates here is *negative*; unable to render tom-tom effects with the French language, Césaire simply "barbarizes" French sounds by transgressing their statistical occurrence in traditional modern French poetry. No one denies the somatic effects of Césaire's prosody, but for some readers (I am one of them), these effects rest more on his use of an exaggerated and radicalized Mallarmean syntax—which is like a respiration of the thought—than on the phonemic substance. Which brings us back, via Mallarmé, to the other vein in Arnold's book: the placing of Césaire's works in the great intellectual vortex of the last one hundred and thirty years we call modernism.

In analyzing its influence on Césaire, Arnold gives just due to many of the modernist masters (Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Valéry, Artaud, Breton, to name just a few) with an unerring flair for intertextual echoes as well as for where and how Césaire departs from his antecedents. He shows that elements considered as typical of modernism often coincide with the aesthetic or philosophical goals dictated by the negritude ideal. The most cogent and central coincidence revolves around Césaire espousing the concept of the tragic as expanded by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche dwells on the Dionysian sacrifice of the king/hero rather than on Promethean constructiveness, on Orphic death rather than on Apollonian triumph. Therefore, Arnold takes exception to a number of optimistic readings of Césaire, whose real message, he says, "is largely eschatological. The hero, the god, must die that the community may live." The loss of self, the acceptance of mutilation and death are obvious in many of the poems of

Solar Throat Slashed, *Lost Body* and *Ferraments*. But since, in contrast with the hero of Greek tragedy, Césaire's (and Nietzsche's) hero is ***innocent***, tragedy ceases to be an enterprise of recuperation of social values and becomes the denunciation of these values. Society can only renew itself by participating in a sacrificial act and precipitating the death of the very order it has created. Thus, adopting this modernistic version of the tragic enables Césaire to stay on the side of counterculture, to challenge, distort and symbolically cancel the values of the Master Race, in other words to satisfy the demands of negritude. This particular captation of a modernistic element for his own use is an excellent example of what Arnold repeatedly calls the "cannibalization" by Césaire of Western myths.

One can predict that the Dionysian/Orphic/telluric obsession at the core of Césaire's poetry would lead away from temporal power. Indeed, juggling poetics and politics—especially if one is a Marxist, even more if one ***has been*** a Marxist—creates a tension in Césaire's double career as an avant-garde poet and a militant figure. Arnold suggests that this tension remained unresolved long after Césaire very publicly resigned from the French Communist Party (1956) and that it accounts in part for the abundance of oxymoronic structures in the poems, especially the "explosive-fixed" metaphors which are one of their stylistic trademarks. These metaphors parallel Césaire's predilection for (in Arnold's words) "epiphanies," that are "momentary dazzling revelations" which, again, reinforce the eschatological tone of the poetry.

In his survey of Césaire's career, Arnold does not overgeneralize and remains aware of the nuances. He helps us to appreciate the poet's accomplishments the better for understanding the existentialist limits of his quest. For Césaire's "miraculous weapons" will both date him ***and*** make him a classic. The vulnerability of a man previous studies have sometimes presented as a "macho phallocrat" takes its nobility from the tragic vision that frames it but, in turn, guarantees the authenticity of this vision. Arnold's rich, eloquent and, by no means, easy pages constitute an ideal source of reference and food for thought for the scholar, the poet, the translator and other critics. On the other hand, it is not an academic tool, a formula book to recommend to undergraduates. It underplays the prose works and reserves the dramatic works for another volume. It is regrettably without bibliography (and Arnold's immense erudition makes one regret it even more) and the index is sometimes baffling (e.g., neither "negritude" nor "modernism" have

entries of their own). Still, this impressive achievement not only crowns several decades of Césairian scholarship but will, for sure, generate much more in the future. △

Agon. HAROLD BLOOM.
Oxford University Press. 1982.

by JED RASULA

Jerome Rothenberg's polemical rereading of Bloom in *Sulfur* #2 was really several years too late in appearing, and by an uncanny coincidence, contemporaneous with the one book it is least applicable to, the new *Agon*. Rothenberg's case is exacting, masterful and necessary, but in regard to the autobiographical tenor of Bloom's new book, also irrelevant. The headstrong righteousness so objectionable in Bloom's earlier books is nearly entirely lacking in *Agon* and the aggressively caustic and peremptory judgments are here more cogently contextualized as Bloom's own case history, personal desires and ambitions, tendencies and shortcomings. It is as if he read his own theoretical studies with the same vigorous eye he applies to poetry: Bloom's revisioning of Bloom is a testament to self-conscious moderation and tact. He even offers a critique of his own Gnostic fantasy, *Flight to Lucifer*. Not that *Agon* is self-criticism; it's simply that Bloom is both more certain of his own bias as a reader and more concerned to articulate his precise location as a man in the theories. It is in fact almost possible to feel the same pleasure reading *Agon* as one would feel reading an autobiography. But the critical voice remains intact and, if anything, more focused than before. The Gnosticism grows more lucid; the reading of Emerson and Freud bolder; the reading of individual poems less objectionable. The attractive side of Bloom's textual compulsions becomes clear in his insistence on the canonical splendor inherent in loving the text, "any text" he finally allows. Who knows, he may even someday be capable of entering the textual Gnostic contest of the *Cantos*, a reading—a confrontation—only Bloom seems ready to attempt. △

A Night With Hamlet. VLADIMIR HOLAN.
Translated by Jarmila & Ian Milner.
Oasis Books. 1980.
Guide to the Underworld. GUNNAR EKELÖF.
Translated by Rika Lesser.
University of Massachussetts Press. 1980.

by JED RASULA

The Waste Land was the 'guide to the underworld' of Europe between the wars. Despite the favorable international exchange rate of Eliot's poem into other languages (including acclaimed versions by Ernst Robert Curtius, George Seferis and others, and the group of Japanese poets calling themselves "Arechi" after the title of the Waste Land), perhaps the most concise manifestations of the impact of *The Waste Land* have been epiphanic collage-like realizations of new poems. Like Piranesi, Eliot made ruins attractive again. The modern threnody has become the (small) book-length poem, meditating on the ruins of a civilization. Essential contributors to the mode are Seferis, Neruda, Paz, Martinson, Ritsos, Holan and Ekelöf, among others. Of all of these, Holan's *A Night With Hamlet* is the darkest: it is a true rumination, the heavy cud of an herbivore destined to become meat.

In Holan's poem the symbolist darkness acquires its most swollen midcentury visage. While his volumes of short poems appear to be alleviated of the symbolist aesthetic in proportion to the encroachment of political blackness, *A Night With Hamlet* retains in the figure of Hamlet that lechery for the infinite and the souring of Romantic exhilaration into morbid reverie and melodramatic exclamation that characterizes symbolism. It is easy to misread the poem if one doesn't attend to when Hamlet is speaking and when he is spoken to, for the melodrama is conscientiously sustained in the poem as an attribute of Shakespeare's hero, while the deeper disillusionment that permeates the entire text is not melodramatic at all, but rather the tragic realization that art like any institution can be an instrument of political oppression.

> And then that astonishing pause,
> recalled during the entire score,
> it is the simultaneous creating the continuous,

a vegetative continuity and therefore dancing,
but already tired as if thinking of truth
could be preceded by feeling for a lie

The specific weariness here is Hamlet's, who is constantly in danger of being disembodied by his status as a literary character, "so locked in himself that all immortality / could fit inside him." "He got in the way of eternity / and had to heal the wound." He is, after all, an ontological puppet inhabited by the hot air of centuries of scrutiny and alienating animation. In Holan's poem it is as if, through having had so much attention paid to him and emphases spoken through him, he had come to life, a new golem. Holan's role in the poem is as liberator: "I was sorry for him, easing him out / of tragedy, gave him the chance to *talk*." And talk he does, for most of the poem's 30 pages, in a cascade of aphorism, image, fantasy, verbal aggression and relapses into stage speech. He is the voice within art—cultivated like a fungus—looking out at life. Hamlet, looking at life from the stage, can only see the living as an audience: in modern times, being a member of an audience is perhaps the only archaic cultural bond left, so his vision of humanity as audience has the air of a primal scene. Even those dozing off in their seats are unaccountably potent:

Even in the presence of the sleeping we are not at ease
for we do not know where they will halt,
while we are stuck in our tracks

The prevailing modern political atmosphere (under any kind of government) is the chilling authoritarian insistence that the *as usual* be maintained. It's a sleight of hand, a trick of stage machinery.

...Keeping faith
they embrace and kiss and do not suspect
that danger itself changes into habit and indifference.

"He who *survives* will get used to it," say Orpheus, whom Hamlet fantasizes bringing Eurydice successfully back to earth out of the underworld. Holan's (Hamlet's) Eurydice is one of the great modern underworld epiphanies, her eyes unable to focus on a tree because she still sees the roots. She is saturated with Hades' realm, and brings a message rivalling the classic austerity of sarcophagus inscriptions: "The deepest existence / is in the unconscious overcome by love." But even she is only Hamlet's fantasy here, and his version

predominates: "for even love / is only part of our certitude...Atonal harmony...the moment of harmony / when there is a short circuit / between heaven and hell."

If Hellenic minds were unable to imagine Eurydice returning to earth, it was because for them life was taken to be a privilege essential to *being*; but in Holan's poem, the situation has gone from bad to worse, from the happy nonbeing of the underworld to *having to be* in the modern world.

> The autopsy then states with reserve:
> When will you forget, soul, that you have not been seen?
> And when will you remember?...
> Then those who remain go and light the lamps for the whole year,
> while the storm, its right hand
> in the chimney's sleeve, puts on the whole house...
> And just when they want to show they aren't afraid,
> fear is already here, fear for no reason, only fear,
> fear of saying it and fear of not saying it,
> fear while the rain beats
> black music on the burdock leaves,
> fear of the squirrel who sits peeling a pineapple cone,
> fear of the nurse who doesn't know the phone number
> of the doctor in the next room,
> fear of the smelting of lead on Epiphany Day,
> fear of a man's or a woman's name-day
> fear of riches, which crave something richer,
> fear of freedom and fear of the poet
> who led Eurydice out of the underworld.

The dilemma of Hamlet has always been identity, more recently augmented through psychology with the notion of ego. In one incomparable aphorism, Holan writes "When egoism overeats / it doesn't throw up but digests and starts again." This could as easily be a line by Ekelöf, whose poetic struggle was always with that same demonic insistence that ego be synonymous with identity. He wrote in "Open It, Write" "And yet you are at the root nameless as night and the dark: / In reality you are no one" and "To renounce the I and its voice, renounce — / this alone gives power." Ekelöf's longer Eliotic culture-fragment identity poem is *A Mölna Elegy*, finally available in full translation in the unlikely location *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, Vol. 1, edited by Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge Univ. 1979). Not one of Ekelöf's finest poems, it is nonetheless essential for its graphic format

and fragmentary principles of assemblage, which include among other things a parallel text for 8 pages of Greek and Latin graffiti, including the cryptic entry from the coition chamber of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii. These inscriptions form a bilateral focus, printed as they are on the left-hand pages while the poem continues on the right. Ekelöf implies that they – and all writing – are sort of permafrost of foetal gravel, lithopedions (rare medical instances of a dead foetus becoming petrified in the womb, a literal child of stone). Against such documents, recent French attempts to equate writing with spermatic leakage seem frivolous. Northern and Central European models of writing are inscriptions on tombstones, unmoving rock (the moving boulder of Christ's tomb is a truly Levantine fantasy). The French tradition goes back to the Bastille, where a prison of stone can be broken by the irritation of blood and semen within.

If *A Mölna Elegy* constitutes Ekelöf's struggle to come to terms with the alienating Northern European ego/identity tradition, his final books—constituting the trilogy completed by *Guide to the Underworld*—shows what was for him, his whole life, the solution of a natural ground for his practice as a poet. This was Persian visionary ek-stasis, as represented by such figures as Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi. The trilogy appearing in the three years prior to his death in 1968 read as authentic visionary 'steps' of the soul approaching the underworld, possessing through a verbal medium the shape of the being that will replace its identity. The final lines of *A Mölna Elegy* are truly cryptic in their apprehension of this condition:

> From the past's rarely
> through now's midway barely
> to the future's still less
> still more rarely

A Mölna Elegy is a poem straining at the borders of textuality; the "Diwan Trilogy becomes another structure altogether, with *Guide to the Underworld* serving as "the central arch of the ruin Diwan." So even in his most fully realized non-Western vision poems, Ekelöf was compelled to return to the fact that his European orientation left him with ruins in his longing for the Orient of his ek-stasis. But the poems themselves are remarkable, often difficult and as much in need of the full complementary psychic space of the reader as the poet himself achieved in order to write these poems as *companions* to the spiritual host or guide which oversaw the quest by

breathing into the poet's ear such clues as "'You lie asleep in a sarcophagus with no bottom.'"

> I am searching for my name—then with the clear logic
> of the dream it strikes me: since the coffin has no bottom
> it must also lack a lid. And he who rests there
> lies with his back against Nothing and his face toward Nothing.
> Only the force field of the four walls holds the sleeper
> floating between the bare interior's demand to forgo
> and the power of the exterior, ornate with myths, to desire—
> Virgin, O Ätokos, when this force field will be broken
> let me, in the dream, be neither reborn nor begotten
> What came before this has no scars from chisels.
> What is to come has no fruits or flowers.

Note on the translations: Difficult as Holan's poem is, it's made even more difficult in this translation, whose apparent literalness often impedes the lyrical flourishes; but I question even the literalness. The image of "a fifth thumb between a pair of thighs" struck me as a misplaced metaphor; consulting Gunter Kunert's German version I confirmed that it is "dritte," a *third* thumb. The Ekelöf texts fare much better in translation. Rika Lesser's translation admirably complements the Sjöberg/Auden text of the other two Diwan books (published in 1971 under the misleading title *Selected Poems*). *A Mölna Elegy* can be found in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, Vol. I*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge Univ. 1979), in a translation by Sjöberg and Rukeyser as uncannily resonant of the original as translations get. Too late to include in this review, but highly recommended: Ekelöf's *Songs of Something Else* (Princeton Univ. 1982), translated by Leonard Nathan and James Larson. △

le Géant

by NORMAN KLEIN

The photographer, Nadar, financed the construction of the balloon *le Géant* in 1863, and it became the colossal flop of the season in Paris. It was lampooned ruthlessly, this monstrosity that lifted off from the Champ-de-Mars and floated erratically to the suburb of Meaux. On its second flight, *le Géant* did even worse, blowing out of control for seventeen hours, and nearly hitting a railroad running through a farm in the duchy of Hanover.

Nadar's wife, who accepted his bohemian style of business (his studio was designed as an arab tent) was past her limit now. She screamed for revenge as she was buffeted with Nadar and seven others, as the 212,000 cubic foot balloon floundered in a strong wind all night. In the morning, she lost her breath, as horses and sheep swelled larger and larger below, and *le Géant* crashed through a tree. Nadar suffered a fractured leg, and even the aeronauts on the flight, the Godard brothers, were badly shaken.

Nadar went on to write a book about his exploits, published by Hetzel and very well received. He continuted to take aerial photographs of Paris, and lured other cultural lions into his aeronautical society (Offenbach, George Sand, Dumas).

The secretary of his aeronautical society, Jules Verne, blended Nadar and African explorer Stanley Livingstone as models for the hero of his first novel, *Four Weeks in a Balloon*. *Le Géant* had failed aeronautically, but it thrived as literature. In Verne's *A Trip to the Moon*, Nadar became the fictional hero Ardan.

Nadar also financed a journal *L'Aéronaute* that survived four issues. Gustave Doré drew the frontispiece, as follows: umbrella flying devices circle the cathedral spire of a medieval town; in the distance, a balloon floats over a railroad crossing a hill. The railroad leaves puffs of smoke that tie the composition together. Doré, who had a childhood balloon phobia, could only bring himself to render *le Géant* as a dot lost in a bad wind.

Hugo called the balloon of Nadar a symbol of freedom. At the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, there are dozens of scrapbooks of caricatures about the balloon, as a foible of science, as a symbol of Napoleon, as a banner of resistance during the Siege of Paris. The Symbolist Redon's balloon is an eye floating in the air. Henri Rousseau's balloon and Max Ernst's balloons are painted as fantasies lost in a wind.

Nadar dreamt of manned flight, particularly of propeller driven flight, helicopters as they were understood in 1863. He was a pioneer of flight before it was invented, but what he invented for the most part was the balloon as a myth of escape. We learn to overcome the air, he wrote, which "overturns walls, uproots century old trees, and tosses the ship into impulsive currents."△

The Weather Book. JANET KAUFFMAN.
Texas Tech Press. 1981.

by JEROME MCGANN

Karl Polanyi has said that one might as easily imagine a person "being born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land." A pressure towards abstraction grows so strong in all aspects of our lives that some Necessity of the Earth seems a rare and crucial possession. Such a necessity defines the work of Janet Kauffman, which is one reason why her poetry is important.

The Weather Book is not a collection of nature poetry. The earth and its seasons are the inevitable environment within which human acts and human speech can—must—begin. Or so it comes to seem when space grows too insistently artificial. Her particular Necessity of Earth invites a human world to be.

> Rally
>
> The Delta Ohio CycleRama just broke up a whole
> hot afternoon, with Crazy Ed of course
> leading the 200, Sunday spun behind him like braids.
>
> I was out front in my striped green plastic
> lounge chair, propped and dull.
> I was thinking I had them, and I might have
>
> had Kid Korman pulled in, gravel hailing the hedge,
> swung himself out of an ongoing cloud,
> and walked my way through the chicory stalks, mildly
> asking lady got some gas (form-a-gasket, band-aid),
> and I'd have said, take off your helmet sweetface
> let me see your hair. Bright Baby Blue and Sugar Sal
> I would have asked in, admired the gloves, boots, glitter
> crashgear, and led them into shade and set out ice
> and green mint tea in fine glasses
> and said, sweets we must do this more often.

This is verse imbedded in locality and the uniqueness which such conditions produce: in this case, the Lower Michigan peninsula, and the tobacco and

muck farms of Ohio and Pennsylvania. These are hard places, full of pitilessness—that bleak and relentless beauty of country places which yield themselves grudgingly, and only to hard work. This is where spirit moves in physical, ordinary, non-symbolic forms. Kauffman is their interpreter.

The Volunteers

In the middle of the afternoon when people turn slowly
and never mind the smoke winds rolling,
the barn shingles snapped off all at once in flames.

The lid gone, everything flew out—hurrahs of fire
rocked the trees, and a small sun cooled.
The timbers of the peak bloomed full,

fell; and in the slow of dreamers watching
we saw a wheat field stretching out beyond,
a brushy line of woods, more sky.

—Well, that's your barndance—easy enough
now to have a party with volunteers,

their numbered hats, their slick coats heaped on grass.
They were young, excited by the whole thing

done with, the drifting smoke, the hay and the metal stink.
They drank Crush and 7-Up and smiled.

Under the trees they spread their legs
and leaned on elbows, each one seeing the same

flame gone, water spent, and the sun
fired up again, wind in curl.

Here is the spirit of place, of the people who inhabit places, of the speech that places permit. Everything in this poetry is human in some local and limited way, which is why it aches so. It deserves quotation rather than this generalizing prose commentary of mine. Not since Eleanor Lerman—a city poet, much more private and Romantic than Kauffman—have I read poetry which commanded such a distinctive quality of speech.

Much is made these days of the importance of prose models for develop-

ing poetic styles. Too much, I should say, as one may see in the volumes of flat, resigned, and songless verse which appear with such frequency. Yet the appeal to prose is not made without reason, for it is an appeal against our traditions of verse abstraction and "fine" Emersonian writing, an appeal made on behalf of plainer virtues, simple talk. Such an appeal is important and in need of encouragement. But lyrical verse can only render human speech in the conventions of its lyricisms, and prose is not the ground upon which those conventions are based. Kauffman knows this very well, and the following poem illustrates what she knows far better than anything I can say.

The Light Has Changed

Now that the mornings rise
golden against the roof, what have I done
with the many-shaded darknesses
I used to roll and roll, smooth in my palms?

The light has changed.
I hear warblers spinning
tree through tree and now I believe
I will go beyond belief and be wind-drawn.

Listen. You shift in your sleep.
I have wanted to be the owl
woman determining dusk. My eyes
see the small black cats asleep.

Night is no longer my dark
and days twirl like leaves.
I have nothing. But watch
how I drift skyward

silently winged, feathered as if at your touch
the folds of wavering curtains drew back.
I sweep over acres of stubble, then
settle in elm, unshadowed. △

Mrs. Bridge & Mr. Bridge. EVAN S. CONNELL.
North Point Press. 1981.

by CORNELIA EMERSON

Evan S. Connell's companion-novels *Mrs. Bridge* (1959) and *Mr. Bridge* (1969) have been reissued by North Point Press in handsome slip-jacketed paperback editions, adorned with images of the stone faces that stare out from Puritan headstones—solemn, stiff, naive. The images announce that these novels represent a flowering of American folk art, documenting an authentic American sensibility; yet the tone is elegiac, dedicated to things passing away.

Set in suburban Kansas City in the years between the World Wars, both novels combine realism with an easy, unselfconscious modernism. Connell catches the perfect pitch of American speech, and a perfect sense of life lived in the substantial upper-middle-class—the comfortable house, the Cadillacs and the Lincoln Continentals, the once-in-a-lifetime trip to Europe. Against this background of solidity, the style of the short, ironic chapters is designed to show up discontinuity, disappointment and frustration. For the lives of both Mr. and Mrs. Bridge are lived as a series of isolated moments—mostly missed chances for love and self-awareness, mixed with a few telling moments of epiphany. Read back to back, the novels point up the solitude in marriage; for within the chronology of family life, the same incidents take on very different meanings for husband and wife.

Mrs. Bridge, who is protected by her husband, coddled by her maid and cossetted by comforts, casts about helplessly for things to occupy her time as her three children grow up and away from home. Motivated by a sweet nature and utter conformity, her main desire is not to be too different from her neighbors, not to draw too much attention to herself. Pliable, passive, innocent and expectant, her feminine attitude leads to ultimate bewilderment, as the novel's epigraph, drawn from Walt Whitman, implies:

> But where is what I started for so long ago?
> And why is it yet unfound?

In the final scene of *Mrs. Bridge*, having survived her husband, who dies of a heart attack, she ends up trapped in a stalled car half-in and half-out of the

garage, her cries muffled by the snow sifting blankly down.

If Mrs. Bridge's crisis of femininity is a timeless one, Mr. Bridge seems both more solid and more time-bound. A self-made man only one generation removed from the farm, he has achieved "financial security, independence and self-respect" by dint of his own hard work—even during these Depression years. Like his wife, he has the characteristic prejudices—against blacks, against Jews. But as an attorney, he is decent, honest, even-handed, a man of the law. Though he is the classic workaholic who spends too little time with his family, he appears to understand his children better than his wife does; he understands his wife better than she does him; and he comes eventually to a hard-won understanding of the balance-sheet of satisfactions and disappointments in his life. The epigraph to the novel *Mr. Bridge*, taken from his fellow attorney and contemporary Wallace Stevens, links him to the American Romantic tradition of rugged individualism and masculine striving that imposes the personality of its ideas of order on the world:

> I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
> Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
> And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

The tragedy of the Bridge novels is that masculine man and feminine woman may meet, marry and yet experience such a pervasive sense of isolation and impoverishment. △

CHARLES BERNSTEIN:
Controlling Interests.
Roof. 1980.
The Occurrence of Tune.
Segue. 1981.
Stigma.
Station Hill. 1981.

by CRAIG WATSON

> *It is through language that we experience the world, indeed through language that meaning comes into the world and into being.... Our learning language is learning the terms by which the world gets seen.*
>
> —CHARLES BERNSTEIN, "Thought's Measure," *L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E*, Vol 4

Controlling Interests (Roof, 1980), like all of Bernstein's books, is organized thematically and not chronologically. Ron Silliman, in his essay "For Charles Bernstein has such a spirit" (The Difficulties, #3, an issue devoted exclusively to Charles Bernstein), maintains that this gives Bernstein substantial license to redefine his poetic activity "particularly if the formation of a subject is taken as the persistent content of the work." His largest volume to date, *Controlling Interests*, contains 17 works concerning the socialization of the individual by means of language. Because language is the constitutive force in thought and because the structures of language are acquired in the public domain, language is indeed a primary socializing force. In this book socialization is the focus of not only thematic content but compositional process as well. In the opening lines of "Matters of Policy" Bernstein states these intentions, characteristically referring to both the perceptual and constitutional processes at once:

> On a broad plain in a universe of
> anterooms, making signals in the dark, you
> fall down on your waistband &, carrying your
> own plate, a last serving, set out for another

glimpse of a gaze.

Syntax, which Bernstein defines in "Thought's Measure" as "the ordering of strings of words," plays an essential role in the articulation of values and relations. He uses a variety of devices, including various punctuation, line breaks, prose and blank space, to render the compositional act visible, as this selection from an untitled poem demonstrates:

So really not visit a remember to strange
A it's always finally seems now which ago
Long that by amazed guess I thing obvious of kind
Fell can weigh a has distance the off
That there it's then & you
While now which whatever point
Slipping constantly be to seems happening
Until fingers the like through sand
Staring there still on back look only can
Before yourself find the of window in thoughts your at

The tonal resonance of this piece, its lack of punctuation and continuous syntactical evolution, reinforces its semantic track of individual powerlessness and search.

Concern with the process of socialization also pervades the occasion of some poems such as "Standing Target," which is made from both "found" language such as camp counsellor reports on young "Charlie" and short biographies of corporate executives and the poet's syntactically varied response to this information. Similarly, "Sentences My Father Used" draws phrases from a conversation between Bernstein and his father as organizing elements in a text about time and relationships. The poem ends with:

Months sink into the water and
the small rounded lump accumulates its
fair share of disuse. Dreadfully private,
pressed against the faces of circular
necessity, the pane gives way, transparent,
to a possibility of rectitude.

The sense of being both in the world and looking at it, the interlocking of subjective and objective visions, continues throughout the book as in this line from the book's shortest poem, "Live Acts":

> The closer we look, the greater the distance from which
> we look back.

In "Matters of Policy," a text largely written about social controls and illusions, Bernstein exposes and critiques this paradox continually:

> Take broom in hand & sweep the chestnuts off
> the boulevard, not so much as a diversion,
> which has long ceased to mute the facts, but
> as a pantomime of what, some other time, you
> might have done. Yet there was a life
> without all this.

But if language is the socializing, constitutive force of experience, there may not be any "life without all this." "Island Life," the book's final work, extends and diversifies this question in a more substantial manner:

> Except that we sail and quit the horizon. Desperate
> or even remotely concerned, waves between
> and the air a constant source of
> the old jangle, musters for itself new conduits
> restless maybe for the things we never use, a half
> haze, half shadow, modestly a project of
> absorption in time, cast about, contentment
> its own course.

Here Bernstein seems to have encountered the problem which underlies the whole book, that is, the question of closure and reconsideration. Because the poems of *Controlling Interests* occur on the plane of immediate response in that they front thinking as the process of perception reaching for meaning, they don't attain an objective, statemental level. The poet is working at an edge of consciousness which forbids another, chronologically-deferred process of thought, that of formal organization and placement of information into an individual operating matrix.

Though written before *Controlling Interests, The Occurrence of Tune* (Segue, 1981) presents a possible resolution to this conflict through its use of individual, seemingly discrete lines and paragraphs in a larger frame. A single text, interspersed with Susan B. Laufer's striking photographs, the book uses "tune" to refer to both musical continuity and the process of consideration and formalization of ideas as in the expression "fine-tuning." The primary relation between textual elements is represented by their contiguity

on the page, divided by white spaces, so that interstitial relations are "like a spark jumping a break in the cable" (Charles Bernstein interview with Tom Beckett, Difficulties #3). Tune therefore emerges as the activity of the reader's mind linking one unit of articulation with the next as well as the effort to contextualize the whole poem. Laufer's photographs animate this disjunction by imagetically deconstructing and retouching photographs of objects and people. *The Occurrence of Tune* however does not resolve the issue of closure because, though the field is more concretely controlled, the reader retains a directing, constitutive role.

Bernstein is evidently aware of this issue and in *Stigma* (Station Hill, 1981) he proposes further resolutions in eleven short poems. Here Bernstein consciously explores closure as a value and weighs its implications as he tests the strain of each text in a limited field. Whereas tension existed in the earlier works as the resonance of movements in a broad context, *Stigma* presents poems that are condensed and precise and which presumably occur at a later stage in the cognitive process. From "March":

> Refused for want of hurting, gain
> Else that quiets, resisting standards
> Partly for fear, ageless glowering
> At shutter speed, or cancel without
> Report. This legless hope, these brief
> Returns.

As with "Island Life," this poem is confronting its own limits and the structural limits of language. In "Stove's Out" he presses the theme of self-defeat even further:

> There is an emptiness that fills
> Our lives as we meet
> On the boulevards and oases
> Of a convenient attachment.

The statemental nature of these lines is pointed and direct; although framing devices continue to be present, they are animated by a fluent, if not linear, track of consciousness. The image of the oasis, as both a point of concentration and rest, occurs in the title poem:

> The quiet oasis of a stall
> Whosoever gains, keeping the spring that

By petulance bounces quickly, a chord
Of speed, wake of manner to be
Numbed.

The book's title refers to the problem of closure and objectification versus processes of continuity and extension. Thought necessarily arrives at this point and, though it need not become fixed in a commodified state, perception does yield to a more stable, limited state of consciousness.

Bernstein's poetry is actively involved in the contradictions, reversals and tensions of thought and language. There are numerous other aspects of the work, including its political implications and place in literary history, that have not been discussed here, though all of these are based in his attitude toward language as a dynamic, as well as expressive, force. The relative success of these works lies both in their ability to draw the reader closer to the structure of language as a material and in their rich articulation of an individual mind in the process of conceiving itself. △

The Principle of Fit. DAVID ANTIN.
Watershed Tapes. 1981.

by ROBERT PETERS

In a recent issue of *The American Poetry Review*, Robert Dana asks James Laughlin if there is currently an avant-garde in American writing. "Well," replies Laughlin, a few writers "are doing something which is totally different from what your average, accepted, good writer is doing." Two such authors (both published by him) are the novelist Walter Abish, and David Antin. Dana confesses that he hasn't seen Antin's "stuff." Laughlin urges him to a library, and confesses that even he doesn't "entirely understand" Antin; but he finds him "so damned amusing" that he enjoys publishing him. So much for the interior decision-making processes of a famous publisher's mind!

Well, I've just listened for the fifth time to Antin's new Watershed tape, "The Principle of Fit. 2." It's both fun and maddening to listen to; Antin amuses with the liberties he takes with the talk-piece, and he irritates when

he's self-indulgent, obvious, and shamelessly didactic.

"The Principle of Fit. 2" relates to three traditions. The oldest, pretty moribund now, is that of the familiar essay, that old genre brought to a consummate artistry by Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey, Hawthorne, Coleridge, Holmes, and Stevenson. The form has continued to flicker on in the prose of T. S. Eliot, Pound, and Olson. These men chatted long, often with an impressive display of brains, on intimate terms with their readers—improvisational, humorous, sometimes testy, employing amusing and literate turns of phrase. Their aim was generally to affect a reader's taste and heart-feelings, those fine sentiments within his person. This is pretty much what Antin tries to do. For all I know, Antin may have read nary a one of these nineteenth-century figures—but the tradition exists. When, in printed versions, Antin eschews normal sentence patterns, scattering blank intervals between phrases on the page, he is merely parlaying that earlier discursiveness into more sophisticated, hip, orthographical dress.

A second tradition is that of the standup comic who regales us with an assemblage of puns and one-liners calculated to induce warm belly-feelings (if not laughs and a few tears) in the listener. In "Fit," Antin at times assumes the intonation of a Shelley Berman or a Henny Youngman, delivering himself before an audience of admirers. He's never scatological or outrageous, as Lenny Bruce was—Antin plays with pretty safe ideas. On this tape Antin's live audience remains remarkably undemonstrative.

A third tradition is that of the hip-professor lecturing to undergraduates, a lecturer who developed his ingratiating platform manner in the 1960's, ala Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, and guru-types who found success by talking *with* rather than by lecturing *to* youthful audiences.

Like these men, Antin is fun to listen to. He almost never trips over a word or thought, and he has calculated well the fat that sticks to the old bones of his discourse. Like Watts, he's a purveyer of *Big Life Themes*. He seldom experiments with language—except for a warmed-over stroke or two borrowed from Gertrude Stein, imitations of some of her repetition devices. There are no off-the-wall ideas or stylistic pyrotechnics, by way of experimentation. Michael Davidson, who is sensitive to Antin's work, agrees that "Antin doesn't 'experiment' with language in the way that, say, Sound Poets or Aleatorists do, by breaking-up the phonetic-semantic structure. His interests are with discourse frames, the codes within which communication

occurs and within which social and intellectual structures emerge. People going to one of David's talk pieces expecting to see something on the order of Cage or Schwitters are often startled to find Mort Sahl or Lenny Bruce; they don't want to be entertained, however interesting the ideas might be—and Antin's pieces are all about ideas. Now if some of the ideas he addresses concern language, there is no reason why the discursive mode has to be broken down just in order to 'materialize' such ideas. David thinks of himself more in the socratic line in which ideas exist in their talking-out, in their self-interrogation." Perhaps Antin has reserved his heavier-weight ideas for other places than this tape.

In "Fit," Antin focuses on three women—two lost to disease, the other lost to success. In *Life I* an old lady goes to a doctor to find out why she can't see well. The doctor "gives" her a disease—glaucoma. And since doctors, Antin says, have more diseases to give than they have patients (who have "patience"), they need patients so as to give their diseases away, hence *fitting* their role as doctors. Our heroine *fits* the given disease, has her operation, and loses the sight in her eye completely. Later, told that she must have an operation on her good eye, she fails to "fit" what the doctor expects, and refuses the new operation. Listening to this riff, we like what we hear. Antin's on our side, if somewhat facilely, against doctors.

Life II belongs to glorious "blonde, beautiful, and fatalistic" Bev, an art department's former administrative assistant. But, beware! If you are blonde, beautiful, and fatalistic, life will chop you to your knees, a legless wooden doll. This is what it does to beautiful Bev, via cancer. Her doctor's gift is terminal leukemia, which Antin defines as white blood cells that are in "bad shape." Bev's loss of her hair leads Antin to digress on his own baldness. Losing one's hair is "no big deal." Antin "willed" his "away," as an act of "absolute honesty," whatever that means. Bev's loss (and her dying) was like going to Vegas (which she loved), that "intersection of order and disorder." When Antin announces Bev's death, he pauses, allowing his gnawing, hurt voice full impact. As a "talking poet," he wanted "to offer her art," at the memorial service. He labored mightily to produce something *fit*, delivered it over the phone 18 times, to get it right. But they didn't use his "art" after all; the prevailing, academic forces decided that his eulogy didn't fit the occasion.

Life III concerns a young actress who leaves Poland to follow her husband

to America. She gets her fairytale by moving upstate and managing a theatrical hotel owned by an old man. If her tale had worked, she would amuse the old man who would leave her the hotel when he died. Well, she gets careless, neglects him, and loses the hotel. Eventually good things happened—a charming husband, good kids, money—all nicely fitting in. Yet, today, she apparently lives in misery, and "has no words" to justify her misery. She cries a lot and considers suicide.

Despite the loquaciousness and the grand-standing, Antin's "Fit" does possess intelligence and skill for shaping talk. There is a sensitivity that goes deeper than the bleeding-heart syndrome. The question, I guess, is of style. His work, for me, moves within the three traditions I mention: but I don't see, judging from this piece, that he makes much of a contribution to experiments with language or forms. △

Three Penny Lane. FIELDING DAWSON.
Black Sparrow Press. 1981.

by NORMAN WEINSTEIN

No other narrative of Dawson's so gracefully demonstrates his affinities with Abstract Expressionist painting. Not even the much praised Kline memoir touches the gist of the Pollock/Kline/Rothko nexus. (That book was the action-epic of replacing the displaced father figure). *Three Penny Lane* uncannily gives the feeling-tone of action-painting, has that energetic charge we vicariously participate in when we see those photographs of Pollock at work in his studio. Here's Dawson's purest statement of intention:

> I want to go into this detail, the storyteller said,
> because in books or in print anywhere, and most of all
> in film, it's just never done, never of contemporary
> painting—or music—think of a movie where Bird, or
> Diz or Miles eat, sleep, walk, practice, see people,
> argue, arrange, compose, worry—and play, consider
> the *hard* work they do.

Consider the structure and thrust of Dawson's labor. *Three Penny Lane* is

the third in a cycle of five novels. The first two volumes are sharply episodic. Lots of finely honed bar stories with quick elliptical shiftings. Vintage Dawson. But few surprises. This novel is linear with considerable twists and leaps. It's a story within a story: a novelist friend of the main character carries the narrative along. The story within the story is a saga about an abstract expressionist artist who acts like an amalgam of Dawson and Franz Kline. The artist is given the unlikely name of "Nathan Fierce" and embodies that name with a fierce intensity.

Fierce is presented as BLOCKED—with women and with his own artistic process. He dances in a spasmodic frenzy between the demands of his ex-wife and his young lover; a death-dance of an apparent burn-out. But, wait, there are unexpected graces—the interventions of a spook, a beautiful woman, an investor who pays him thousands for his two remaining canvases when Fierce is ready to sell his studio and quit the New York art scene. Dawson is definitely as shameless as O'Henry. The old (and highly sentimental) surprise ending prevails.

But the story—like all stories—surges with an energy no simple plotting can contain. A great vortical swirl of electrical enthusiasm about painting, color, physical gestures of arm and hand thrusting FORWARD toward all possibilities the blank canvas offers, then:

> It's utterly *wild* how it suddenly unfolds—and falls
> into place! It's like Cecil Taylor! Alice says novels
> work like that too—the whole Goddammed thing! BAM
> like *that*, he snaps his fingers—and laughs, tossing
> his head madly, Judy stepped to the painting, and with
> a grim smile, said BAM, snapped her fingers to the
> painting—like *that*, applied rose red.....

That's how Dawson operates: epiphanies at Interstate speeds. But there's no sloppy excess (a la Kerouac), no Thomas Wolfe-like rivers of rhetorical cotton candy. The sentences gallop like prime apaloosas with prime mescaline in their feed.

Three Penny Lane solidifies Dawson's position as prime mover of Projective Prose. No other prose writer has carried the "one perception must lead to further perception" dictum quite as far, as deep. The cadences of a nervous and twittering intelligence ricochet off the pages. A—for all his neurotic fixes about women and sex and money—*humane* intelligence. Lots

of gentle self mockery in this story. Dawson has the knack of being psychological without resorting to psychobabble.

Why he's never gained a MASS audience for his novels I'll never know. He even indulges in writing a few pages in the form of a screenplay. An open invitation to Hollywood? Like the Beatles' song, this novel can easily slide into further variation on the same theme. As the song goes: "Meanwhile, back...."△

Selected Poems 1958-1980. GILBERT SORRENTINO.
Black Sparrow Press. 1981.

by NORMAN WEINSTEIN

This book title is absolutely inadequate. Here's my suggestion: *New York Spleen*. Twenty two years of the lyric celebrating the splenetic, the bitter (Sorrentino's favorite word / hit like a drone note in a raga), the *nigredo*.

The early poems here (reprinted from *The Darkness Surrounds Us* and *Black and White*) sound like well crafted extensions of the young Creeley's craft. Angst and guilt burst out from the poem in all directions:

> He came to the day that made him a hopeless husband
> and said to himself that he was indeed that husband
> but what kind of husband
>
> did the bitch suspect
> he was?

The typical Creeley posture: the plight of the male lover thoroughly disquieted in the presence of women — yet hungry for their touch. Sorrentino's speech is not quite as compressed as Creeley's. This is the Bronx talking, not laconic New England. The lines, however, are tight, tense, keenly focused. Sorrentino follows Creeley in feeling essentially *uncomfortable* in the world — a mass of jagged nerves and shy asides. And these early Sorrentino poems reveal a classic ploy utilized by writers when they feel existentially displaced: cynical, ironic detachment. His titles during this period form a despairing litany: "Faces of Doom and Sterility," "Bar Games," "The Evening News".

An icy and unrelenting darkness surrounds these poems. It's like seeing a large museum display case filled with black obsidian. The eye hungers for relief — even in the midst of feasting upon the jewels.

A painstaking reading of this more than generous selection of Sorrentino's poetry led me to the conclusion that there is no relief whatsoever from the tone established in his early work. The poet's verbal agility deepens with the passage of time; *his psychological depth doesn't*. Psychologist James Hillman claims that pathologizing (which is precisely what I see these poems doing — opening every festering psychological wound Sorrentino has lived through) leads to the making of soul. The selections from *Corrosive Sublimate* (particularly "Coast of Texas" and "Anatomy") point in that direction. Yet pathologizing can also lead to embarassingly superficial fixes like:

> Rich and poor
> of every color and idea
> show themselves
> mannequin and dummy.

When Sorrentino transcends the limitations imposed by his own constant cynical carping he impulsively reveals a softly romantic sensibility. The tenderness in a marriage poem like "Simplicity" (from *The Orangery*) is staggering in this context. Like a breath of fresh air after walking a mile through a smoke filled subway tunnel.

Sorrentino's poems of the past few years move toward a heavy utilization of repeated key words and images. The poems in *The Orangery* cleverly and imaginatively stretch "orange" as a leitmotif (much along the lines of Ross Feld's shamefully neglected *Plum Poems*.) The poems become a trifle lighter and wittier. Funny how irony, light gallowshumor, and wit — the holy trinity of the hacks who get regularly promoted in the academic press — become the *substance* of Sorrentino's poems.

Strangely, as his poems seem more mannered and less substantial, the man's prose soars. There is no question in my estimation that Sorrentino is one of a precious handful of great American novelists revitalizing the form and spirit of the novel. But let's not dismiss *Selected Poems* too facilely. There are at least sixty poems in this book I treasure. A book half the size of this one (approaching 125 pages) would have highlighted these poems in a more flattering fashion. But these tough edged poems deserve attention.

And Black Sparrow has made this a physically handsome book for the eye and hand. △

The Person of Fiction, The Fiction of Person

by William Bronk

When Paul Pines was writing a memoir of a certain period of his life, he showed me an early draft. I suggested that the most interesting personage in his account was himself and that he had been slighted—he wasn't enough there. He said he was aware of this and found it a problem. Several drafts later, the memoir had become fiction because by fiction he had been able to include himself more fully, more truly.

Using an invented name and personage, Richard Elman has written what claim to be an elderly man's recollections of bizarre people he had known through a long life in small community. The concluding sketch is headed with my name and many details of it are accurate and easily verified. When I objected to this invasion and its several injustices, he said I must realize the whole thing is a fiction including the supposed author and including me as a subject. But I observed that my name is not, in the ordinary sense at least, a fiction.

In a more profound sense, our names of course are fictions; as with concepts and objects and places, they are simply what things or persons are called commonly, not what they really are, not their true names if there can be said to be true names for anything. Persons, places, various objects in our experience have qualities for us which resist our assessment. They are mysterious and have a kind of magic for us. We are often aware or can be made aware that, to the mundane and rational eye, this mystery doesn't exist, is a pure fiction, as we say. At the same time, we know that one of the terms we use to characterize aspects of our experience which seem most moving and powerful to us and, in that sense, the most real, is 'storied.' The central pol-

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This essay was occasioned by the publication of Gilbert Sorrentino's *Crystal Vision*, North Point Press, 1981.

arity and tension which energizes Gilbert Sorrentino's work is this one between the opposite faces of fiction. Although it is sometimes spoken of as a technical and aesthetic problem of the medium and Sorrentino himself often speaks of it this way, its importance is not so much to the medium as in its being, within the medium, a metaphor for a problem outside the medium: who we are really and what is the nature of reality.

These are questions whose answers we don't know and which seem unrewarding to consider. It is more practical to rely instead on our common sense which gives us a usable answer without looking too closely. There is always a tenuous but sturdy fiction of ideas received and accepted and taught at so general and unaware a level that the ideas can properly be called common sense. It is the kind of fiction we consider matter-of-fact. It pretends that the central mysteries of our nature and experience don't exist and its drabnesses lead us sometimes to say, "Tell me a story." And such a story is the common sense idea of fiction: an escape from the drabness of matter-of-fact. Even in such stories, there are constant references to the framework and terms of common sense and not only in their departures from that framework and those terms. They invent attractions and marvels as substitutes for the incomprehensible whose omission from the matter-of-fact makes common sense itself a fiction.

Sorrentino's *Steelwork* is a matter-of-fact fiction, a straight-forward reminiscence of growing up in Brooklyn. Many of the people in the book are probably close renderings of actual people including, of course, the one called Gibby, a self-portrait of sorts, accurate or no. These people's lives are entirely outside the book; they appear there only in quick sketches or candid snaps which have as little effect on them as a Xerox copy has on the document copied. It is only a book and their life is not in the book. It is a long way from *Mulligan Stew* whose inhabitants have no life other than book life—this book or some other, since they may have originated in other books, and they contemplate leaving this book not for the life of the streets or the fields but for somebody else's pages. They have such existence in the actual world as dolls or puppets have. Their utility in giving the illusion of life is wholly in their not being alive. As ventriloquist's dummies they will say whatever is required of them, will even argue back comically with the ventriloquist as he prompts them to accomplish his purpose. They couldn't seem to be alive unless they were lifeless.

Oppositely, we couldn't know the lifelessness of another set of persons if we had not seen their faces and costumes, listened to their conversations, read their poems, looked at their paintings, repeatedly in our own experience. These are the people in *Imaginary Qualities Of Actual Things*, an account of some who have made a fiction of their lives outside of a book. They have invented characters called by their names whose lives they live after the manner of their invention. They intend that by actually living a fiction they will verify it and they will be the artists they think to be. But they remain fictions; art does not emerge consequently from la vie de bohème to which it is indifferent. In the book they are Sorretino's inventions and true whereas a lived fiction outside of a book is false. The invention of the novelist adheres to experience and fact, the reality which it celebrates. The lived fiction departs from reality in order to deny it. It is because we all do this in some degree that Sorrentino says that, to write funny stories about it as he does, is limping magic to ward off disaster. Any honest artist knows his own failure. It is Sorrentino's sense of his own loss and failure which is the source of the scathing hilarity of this book. It is said that several readers recognized themselves there and were angry with Sorrentino for cruel portraits. Of course; we all recognize ourselves there however different the details of habit and appearance may be from ours. We seem to identify ourselves and each other by a multitude of specific details of name and appearance and history. In this book, Sorrentino repeatedly refers to the arbitrariness and irrelevance of these reportorial details in respect to his invented characters. Yet, we recognize ourselves. The perfect fiction gets at our truth, our reality, by going behind the panoply of make-believe in which we disguise ourselves by the ways we dress and talk and otherwise behave—by our style.

When our style is conscious and deliberate, it is a desperate device to realize oneself, to become a person in more than the biological sense, to mean something as that person, which is a hard thing to do if we have to think about it. Years ago, it was said that the concerned person who thought about it would be led to either the Communist Party or the Catholic Church. More recently, we have had ashrams and kibbutzim, fundamentalism and the Moonies, not to speak of the unquestioned conventions of the neighborhood which have been there all along. These external identities falsify us by their limitations but give us definition and we want to be defined. What we want defined, however, is our indefiniteness, our unlimited

possibility.

Our person is, finally, more desire than realization. Sorrentino's *The Sky Changes* is an exposition of desire in its rages and frustrations. Its form is a flight across country by car toward a new life whose desire might be no longer lost and unrecoverable. The house and garden, all the old assets are cashed in and the pursuit is ventured with a trusted friend for help as a driver. But the assets, which were unearned from the dead, spend themselves on day-to-day needs and emergencies, the driver betrays his trust, the desire still agonizes and only the sky changes.

We laugh at the clothes we wore in old photographs, at the things we find in the attic. What strikes us now as dowdy and shabby was once the up-to-the-minute glamour which promised to make us in our own eyes and the eyes of the world. The aberrance of the light of the stars we set our hearts on is the theme of *Aberration Of Starlight*. The things we loved once—how we loved them! It is a terrible cruelty that we need to cling to the validity of our love in a world where almost nothing answers to our desire, where our love proposes a reality which is not agreed to, where our self, that solid person of our aspiration, exists only there or in a fiction.

Sorrentino has felt how certain jazz musicians, certain baseball players have reached an unsurpassed transcendence of self-realization. He knows that it is their art and not their person that has made that reach.

Now, in *Crystal Vision*, a reuse of the milieu of *Steelwork*, there are names but no identities: no persons. Gibby, though he may be remembered, is an abandoned sentiment not worth speaking of. The names which do appear are less persons than figures on baseball cards but not the ones we know. They are players in leagues so minor we never heard of them. Who they are doesn't matter at all; they are nobodies. They make certain ritualized plays or misplays which we watch for awhile. Are there substitutes and replacements or do we just confuse one with another? Without any prompting, we begin to recognize a view of our own perceptions where distinctions are lost and misperceptions are true. Our recollections merge so that we make a person out of several persons, mix brothers with cousins or neighbors, and fathers with sons, and nobodies may have been somebodies once. We don't know. People fade and disappear as though they never were. Were they? Whatever, if anything, may be realized in our experience, it is not the self, not the person. It is seen that the assumption that all those persons

sketched in *Steelwork* had a real life outside of the book is a false assumption: it is a fiction. This Brooklyn is Prospero's island where the actors were all spirits and "melted into air, into thin air" and, indeed, the least dissoluble ones were quite literally actors, the character actors of the movies. And there were sounds and sweet airs that gave delight and hurt not: the music of ritual discourse, the stimulations of desire, the Aladdin-wealth of penny candy. The ending is less despair than hilarious laughter. △

▲

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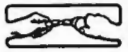
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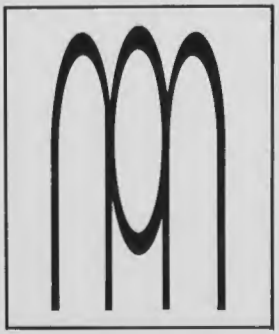

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